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MYSTERY MAGAZINE



DECEMBER 1983

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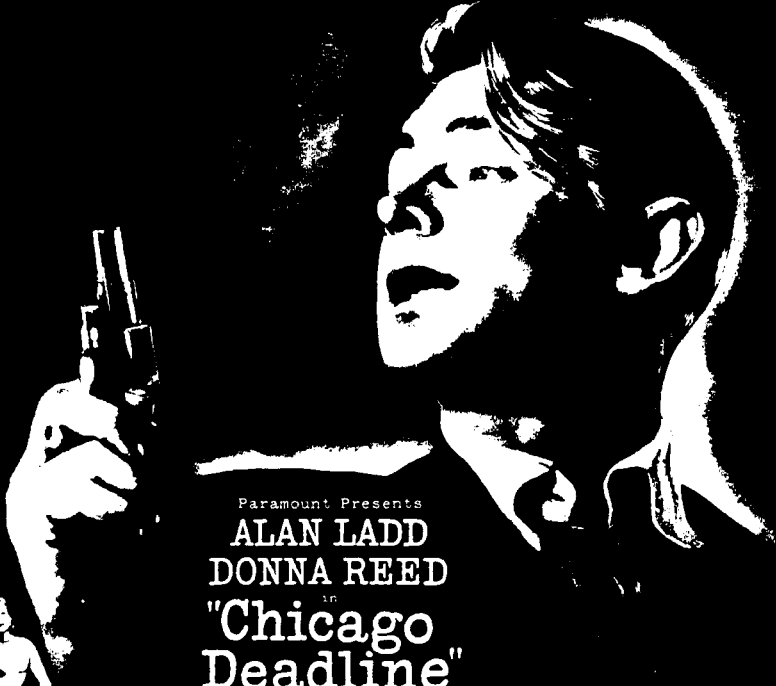
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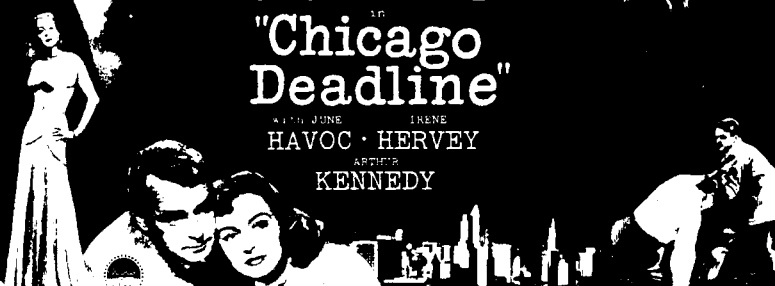
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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 1983

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SILENT DEATH

by Brett Halliday

Sometimes death comes quietly, sometimes noisily — but murder was always unpleasant. Mike Shayne knows, for murder is his business — and catching the killers before they can add him to their list of victims! 4

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The judge was dead — murdered silently and efficiently in the night — and Mike Shayne was on the job, up to his elbows in suspects and red herrings. It was a tough nut to crack, but the redheaded shamus felt his pulse race at the challenge. Here was a case he could get his teeth into!

Silent Death,

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE SOUND OF THE SMALL MOTORBOAT JUST OFF SHORE IN the late summer evening was not unusual, but it marked the opening of the last act in Judge Delos' life.

As he leaned comfortably on the porch railing of his small bungalow, he heard the motor sputter, die, then sputter and start again. He peered into the darkness, but could see nothing.

"Damn fool," the judge muttered. "No running lights."

Behind him, the screen door opened. "Who's a damn fool, dear," asked the judge's wife, Margaret, as she stepped onto the porch.

"That boater out there. No running lights. Now he's having engine trouble. A hazard to every other boater out there."

Margaret Delos reached out and took her husband's arm. For a moment the two of them stared out at the dark water of Palimpset Bay, twenty miles or so from Miami. The glow from the city outlined the sharp curve of the shoreline, casting the distant rows of palm trees into sharp relief. Sounds of traffic from Highway A1A were muted.

Judge Michael Delos was an important man in Miami. After nearly twenty years on the bench, he was nearing his retirement at sixty-five, and looked forward to it. Considered a humorless man, he had a strong sense of family and of duty. His acknowledged honesty and adherence to both the letter and spirit of the law had enabled him to survive the politics and aspirations of younger men, leaving him unscathed, respected and feared. When lawyers felt they had the facts on their

side, they prayed for Judge Delos to hear the case. In cases where emotions were the better asset, lawyers hoped for another judge — any other judge.

Married over forty years to the same woman, Michael and Margaret Delos had raised their three sons with the same sense of strict fairness that typified the judge's behavior on the bench. Their life had fallen into a routine that was comfortable for both parents: weekdays in Miami, weekends at their retreat on Palimpsest Bay. Only once had this routine varied, when a hurricane had so badly damaged the ten small homes circling the Bay as to make them briefly unlivable. Repairs had been quickly effected, and the routine restored.

Margaret was a small, spare woman, exuding a surprising amount of personal warmth. Her life had been dedicated to her husband and her children. Her few friends were close friends, her public associations functional and useful.

The resurgent sound of the motorboat approached the landing docks of Palimpsest Bay. Michael and Margaret Delos had less than an hour to live.

AS THE DELOSES RE-ENTERED THEIR HOME, JASPER CALDWELL, aboard the rented launch, cursed the once-more-sputtering engine. Somehow, sand had been sucked into the engine, and its fitful operation became increasingly dubious. Caldwell needed this boat for a while yet this night to accomplish his task. He had never backed out of a commitment yet, and he certainly didn't want to back out of this one: the death of Judge Delos was as important to him as it was to his partner, now sitting silently nearby.

Caldwell muttered a relieved sigh as the engine once more chugged into fitful life, moving inexorably toward the Delos home.

Some ten yards from the small mooring slip, Caldwell regretfully cut the engine. The boat glided toward the gently bobbing raftway. Quickly, expertly, Caldwell stepped onto the floating dock, tying the boat down almost simultaneously. He stood then, looking at the now empty porch, illuminated by a single yellow light. He patted his jacket pocket, making certain that the small pistol was still there. Reassured, he walked to the steps leading to the sandy beach.

Silently, he climbed the steps and crossed the narrow stretch of sand, moving in the shadows to the side of the house and the front porch. Here, too, a yellow light shone in the darkness.

Caldwell knocked boldly on the front door. The sound rang hollowly

in the dark night. After a moment's pause, Caldwell knocked again.

Judge Michael Delos opened the door to his murderer. Shirtless, the judge had begun to change into his pajamas when the knock had come.

He adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses and looked at the visitor. "Yes?" the judge inquired.

"Judge Michael Delos? You are Judge Delos, aren't you?" Caldwell asked, a note of anxiety in his voice. What if he had miscalculated and landed at the wrong slip?

"I am Judge Delos."

Caldwell stepped forward toward the door. "I'm having some engine trouble with my boat, and I wondered if I could use your phone to call for help."

The judge's lips pursed. "I heard your boat. You had no running lights," he said accusingly, stepping back to allow Caldwell to enter. "Certainly, you may use the phone, but I would suggest . . ."

Caldwell pulled the gun from his pocket and pushed the judge backward into the entry slamming the door behind them. "Don't move," he said lowly, threateningly. "Is there anyone else home?"

"My wife," the judge answered coldly.

"Call her," Caldwell ordered.

The judge stood silent.

"You heard me. Call her," Caldwell repeated jamming the gun into the judge's stomach. Roughly, he shoved the judge toward the sitting room just off the entry.

"Margaret," the judge said in the stentorian tone he had often used to silence courtrooms. "Come out here for a moment. There's some trouble."

Margaret Delos came from the bedroom through the short hallway to the sitting room, adjusting her bathrobe. "What is it, Michael?" she said. She saw Caldwell and his pistol. She halted at the edge of the room. "Robbery?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Judge Delos responded.

"Quiet," Caldwell growled as he pulled a rolled up series of leather strips from his hip pocket. "On the floor. On your stomachs."

The judge and his wife hesitated, exchanging glances.

"Judge," Caldwell said coldly, "I've killed others. I won't hesitate to kill both of you if you don't do exactly as I tell you."

The Deloses silently followed his instructions. With sadistic thoroughness, Caldwell tied the couple's hands behind their backs. The leather cut cruelly into the flesh of their wrists.

"O.K.," Caldwell instructed. "Now out the back door. Make no noise. We're going for a boat ride. Nothing will happen to you if you just keep your mouths shut."

Awkwardly the couple rose to their feet. Margaret Delos winced as the leather cut more deeply into her wrists. Silently, she followed her husband toward the rear of the house and onto the back porch where they had stood minutes before. As they reached the porch, Caldwell swatted at the light with his pistol, shattering it. In the darkness, Margaret Delos stumbled on the top step, falling the three steps to the walk. She cried out. Caldwell quickly pulled her to her feet, cuffing her cheek. He pushed her toward her husband. Slowly the trio walked across the beach, down the few steps to the float and to the boat.

Caldwell assisted them aboard the fifteen-foot launch. Nudging them toward the cabin entry. It was then that Judge Delos saw Caldwell's partner. "So it's you," was all the judge said. The silent figure nodded.

Caldwell started the engine, breathing a sigh of relief as it started instantly. Remembering, he then untied the craft from the float, then moved back to the helm, throwing the propeller into reverse and gently, slowly, backing away from the shore.

His eyes trained on the stiffly silent couple, he steered the boat away from land toward the cold, dark ocean. For the next fifteen minutes, the boat moved uninterruptedly toward the ocean, the lights of Miami bright along the shore, the stars glittering overhead.

The engine sputtered and died. Cursing, Caldwell attempted to start it. "Don't bother," his partner said. "This is far enough."

Caldwell looked at his partner and shrugged. He moved toward the judge. For a brief moment the two men's eyes met. The judge's eyes were cold, and the killer looked away. He lifted a diver's belt from the deck.

As Caldwell approached, the judge suddenly kicked out. Caldwell easily dodged. A vicious kick of his own caught the judge on the side of the head, rendering him semi-conscious. Margaret Delos gave a low cry as she watched her husband slide to the deck.

Quickly, Caldwell fixed the diver's belt around the judge's waist, then performed the same action with Margaret Delos. She did not struggle much, and was easily subdued.

The belts were weighted, designed to carry a living body to the ocean floor. Without a word, the judge was pushed over the side into the water lapping gently against the boat. He sank rapidly. Margaret

Delos followed. Her greying hair floated upward briefly as she, too, sank quietly. The judge's glasses, which had been knocked from his face during his scuffle, were also thrown overboard.

For a moment, Caldwell watched the spot where the couple had disappeared, and then he turned his attention to the engine. "You could have helped," he said admonishingly to his partner.

"You didn't have any problem," the other replied.

The engine sputtered to an uncertain life, and the boat moved shoreward again, heading toward a dock closer to Miami, where it had been rented that morning.

The shotgun blast rang out long before the boat came within sight of the dock. The soft summer air absorbed it and returned to a night-time stillness.

After docking the boat, a lone figure walked without hurry toward the car parked beside the closed rental shack.

In the small bungalow next to that of the Deloses, Annjanette Ridenhour stood thoughtfully by the rear door. Elderly and living alone, she had not wanted to investigate what she had seen earlier.

But she thought about it. The strange craft tied to the Delos' float. The flat-faced, heavily built man on board, loading what appeared to be a shotgun. Seeing this, Annjanette Ridenhour had brought her usual summer evening walk to an abrupt halt, and had retired to her bungalow. She had seen nothing further, and had heard nothing.

Annjanette Ridenhour was deaf.

II

THE EARLY MORNING LIGHT MADE FLAGLER STREET LOOK barren, and the lack of traffic added a shabby stillness to it all. Already hot, the day promised to be a real scorcher.

From some hidden alleyway, the growling and grinding of a garbage truck was the first sound of life, soon to be joined by a few early motorists, until the flow of life was restored to this area of Miami.

By ones and twos and threes the shops along Flagler Street opened their doors. A young black man broomed a few gum wrappers and miscellany toward the gutter, then entered the store where he clerked.

His first customer that morning was Lucy Hamilton, who walked briskly to the counter. "A bottle of Martel," she requested. "And this ribbon," she added, laying a package of gift wrap ribbon on the counter.

The clerk rang up the purchases and handed Lucy her change. "Something special?" he asked.

Lucy smiled. "It certainly is," she stated. "It's Flagler Street Secretary's week," she explained, smiling. The clerk looked puzzled, as Lucy picked up her purchases and left.

"HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MICHAEL SHAYNE," LUCY SAID AS SHE placed the bottle of Martel Cognac on his desk. Her tone did not match the sentiment, nor did her eyes reflect the bright red ribbon tied neatly around the neck of the bottle.

Without another word, she returned to her desk. The lanky, red-headed detective swung his feet off his desk, laid down his newspaper and followed her.

Catching up with her before she sat down, he pulled her to him. "Hey, Angel," he said, taking her chin in his hand and tilting her face towards his. "What's all this?"

"It's your birthday present," Lucy snapped, "just a little late. But no later than you are. Or did you forget that we were going out for dinner last night?"

A grin broke across Shayne's rugged face. "No, I didn't forget, Angel. But something came up."

"And I suppose you just couldn't call?"

"That's right."

"Oh, Michael!" Lucy said exasperated:

For a moment the two looked at each other.

"Well?" Lucy finally queried. "What was it?"

"What was what?" Shayne responded, still grinning.

"What came up that was so important?" Lucy snapped, turning and moving toward her desk.

"A hell of a case, Angel," Shayne said, growing serious. "The Judge Delos disappearance."

Lucy's eyebrows rose. "I thought the police were handling that. Didn't they say they had a suspect and the arrest was imminent?"

Shayne grinned. "They always say that when they reach a dead end."

"How'd you get into it?" Lucy asked, seating herself behind her desk.

Shayne draped a leg over the edge of the desk. "The judge's sister, Helen Delos, caught me as I left the office last night. She asked me to come out to her place and talk with the family."

Briefly, Shayne sketched out for Lucy the events of the night before, how Helen Delos, her eyes worried and reddened, had appealed to him

to help find her brother and his wife, how the judge's three sons — a prominent merchant, a lawyer and an accountant — had also asked him to solve the mystery that had all of Miami and most of the nation in thrall.

"Where do we start, Michael?" Lucy said, impressed and efficient.

"I'd like to start with Tim Rourke," Shayne said, rising. "He ought to be at work by now. He was somewhere between home and the paper when I called earlier. See if you can get him on the phone. Ask him if he can get me copies of all the background material on the judge, and have it ready for me when I get there."

"Right, Michael," Lucy reached for the phone. "And Michael?"

"Yes, Angel?"

"I really *do* wish you Happy Birthday."

SHAYNE THOUGHT OF HELEN DELOS AS HE MANEUVERED HIS Buick through Miami's traffic. Despite the worry in her eyes, he had noted a steely hardness in her. She made a fit sister for old Judge Delos.

Of the four — the three sons and the Judge's sister — Helen Delos had been the most insistent. The boys had joined her, but she was obviously the new head of the family, and they were equally obviously following her lead.

Sad, Shayne thought, that a man who had made such a mark on Miami could leave behind children so apparently indifferent to his fate. Or were they merely responding as rich kids often did, selfishly and without thought, so used to parental guidance that their individual feelings had been lost?

Shayne shrugged as he parked his car and strode into the building housing the *Miami Daily News*. Whichever way, the boys were about as concerned as cold fish.

Rourke was hard at work at his desk when Shayne arrived at the City Room. Barely glancing up at Shayne's approach, Rourke nodded toward a bulky manila envelope on the edge of the desk. "It's all in there," he grunted. "The most pertinent is on top. Strictly bio material is at the bottom."

Shayne sat in a stiff wooden chair beside the gaunt reporter's desk. "What's the latest on Delos?" he asked, picking up the envelope.

"You are," Rourke grinned as he halted his typing. "It'll be going out over the wires in about an hour," he added, tearing the paper from the typewriter and placing it in a box marked "Copy — Ready."

"Other than that, the police are half-stymied. Half-stymied, because the only thing between them and that famous 'imminent arrest' is a steel-clad alibi. Their suspect is in jail on a murder charge, which will now have to be recalendared since Delos was presiding judge.

"The way they figure it," Rourke explained, "Rivera — that's their suspect — hired someone. The cops just can't figure out who or how."

"Why'd they land on Rivera?" Shayne asked.

"He'd made enough threats, and his trial was coming to a foregone conclusion. It was non-jury, and there was no way Delos would have acquitted. So boom, Delos is gone, boom, the case is halted, and boom, the next judge will have to start from scratch. And final boom, the defense knows all the prosecution tricks and can muster up better answers.

"It's the convenience, see. No other case the judge handled was half so threatening to anybody. No other motive can be found."

"Just who is Rivera," Shayne inquired.

"A Cuban refugee. The cops believed he was running drugs in from Columbia for a long time. No proof. Then Rivera's caught up in an alleyway with a dead body, loading it into the trunk of his car. A freak arrest, but it held up in court. Cops had started down the alley on a routine check and spotted the whole thing."

"And there was nothing else the police could find as a motive for doing away with Delos?"

"Nope. Nothing. The judge's calendar is in there. A few prostitutes, a possession case, and an in-camera hearing on some sort of two bit graft. Some lawyer and a cop."

"How about the past? Any burning grudges released from prison lately? Any political enemies?"

"Nary a thing going on. At first the cops thought there would be an attempt at ransom, hoping this was a kidnapping. But there's been nothing. They're betting on murder. And so am I." Rourke eyed his friend cannily. "Now, Mike, tell me what the family's betting on."

Shayne grinned. He began reading the material from the envelope as he responded. "The family — that is, the judge's sister, Helen Delos — is making no bets any way. The sister is scared that it is murder, but isn't convinced, not by a long shot. The boys, if they think at all, think what she thinks: could be murder, let's hope for less."

"They're a shifty-eyed lot, all of them except for Helen. She's the only sincere one of the bunch. And she's hard, Tim. Scared, worried, but hard as steel. She all but defied me to contradict her when

she said there was still a good chance her brother and sister-in-law were alive.

"About the only time the boys gave a spontaneous reaction was when their aunt said she'd spend every cent the family had to solve this disappearance."

THE REDHEADED DETECTIVE FELL SILENT AS HE GLANCED through the material Rourke had gathered for him. There was little there to interest him. The brief biographical data as recorded over the years showed only what could be expected of a hard-driving, fair-minded man whose politics had not muddied his decisions, whose politics, indeed, were almost indiscernable: A Democratic appointment to the bench, a Republican commendation.

Shayne laid the material back on Rourke's desk.

"How much are they paying you, Mike?" Rourke asked bluntly.

"Standard," Shayne answered, lighting a cigarette. "Standard."

"Anything good I can tell my readers?" the reporter queried.

"Nothing's happened that I haven't told you about," Shayne responded. "I got called in and am brushing up on the background. But you can tell me a few things."

"Like what?"

"Well, for starters, there's nothing in your file about Delos' boys. What do you know about them?"

"Not much." The reporter looked thoughtful. "The oldest one, Harry, runs HD Discount Mart. He and his wife don't figure much in the local news. Just quietly rich. The second son, Wayne, is a corporation lawyer. Has a large, selective clientele up in Atlanta. The third son, Garrison, is an accountant. Not much to say about him. Run of the mill. Sort of the family failure. Not rich, but comfortable middle class." Anticipating Shayne's next question, Rourke grinned. "No, nobody has anything against the boys, either, Mike."

"Can't say that about the sister, though. She's rich, she's cranky, and in her youth, was pretty wild. Got into a bunch of scrapes. Thrown out of a couple of the finest schools in the East, came home and startled the hell out of half the State with some of the wildest shenanigans you can think of. Massive fund raising party in a whorehouse as a charity event for retired streetwalkers. That kind of thing. She might have run up a few enemies in her day."

"Might have?"

"Well, her latest thing is helping Cuban refugees. She stirred a few

feathers in the capital with that one. Gave a lot of inside background on the refugee camps to the news media, including yours truly, when she didn't get things done her way quick enough. A lot of red political faces in town after she was through."

"There might be something there," Shayne said thoughtfully, pulling at his earlobe. "Anything else?"

Rourke shook his head.

"Then I'll beat it over to Gentry's. If you can think of anything, or if anything else comes up, let me know."

"You got it," Rourke snapped, returning to his typewriter.

WILL GENTRY GROWLED A GREETING TO SHAYNE AS THE detective entered his office. The Miami Chief of Police motioned Shayne to a chair.

"What brings you here, Shayne," the burly cop asked.

"The Delos case."

Gentry frowned. "What's your connection?"

"Helen Delos hired me to stay a step ahead of you guys," Shayne grinned, "and to make sure no stone is unturned in the hunt for her brother. They're near and dear to each other."

"Hmph," Gentry snorted. "That wasn't the way I heard it last."

"Fill me in."

"The judge called her 'Hell-on De Loose' for starters. That was ever since she used his name to get a bunch of big wigs to attend her 'Charity Function' for retired whores, and lately she's seen to it that every Cubano that comes in front of her brother has all the big legal talent they need. She's used a few of the finest shysters in the county. Delos finally quit hearing any case involving any Cuban, if he could possibly help it. Between those two events is fifty yards of sticky mud and thirty years of family wrangling." The chief let out a low chuckle. "She even helped his sons go through their growing pains."

"First I've heard of any family trouble," the lanky detective stated flatly.

"Oh, nothing too big. I think those two really enjoyed baiting each other. The only real problem was the boys."

"How's that?"

"Well, Wayne and Garrison were trouble makers in their teens. There's five or six years between Wayne and Harry, but only one year between Wayne and Garrison, and those two were in heavy competition in school — and after school. Ran with some pretty

wild crowds. They've quieted down, respectable now, though Wayne has been known to deal with one or two shady corporations in the courtroom. Nothing spectacular, but we suspect one of them might have some Mafia tie-ins. That's Atlanta-Lauderdale Manufacturing. They have a branch here in Miami, and we keep an eye on them. Our suspicion is that they launder some dirty money. But if they do, they don't seem to be doing it here."

"How come you don't suspect any tie in with the judge's disappearance? The Mafia sounds like a better bet than some two-bit murderer."

"Judge Delos had nothing to do with his son's business. And so far as we can tell, Wayne's nose is clean with them. They're not likely to do anything to shake up a legal eagle, unless there's some big stakes. And there don't seem to be any."

Shayne nodded.

"Wayne's the only one of the family that seems to have picked up Helen's wildness, though I would have thought Garrison would be a little noisier."

"Why's that?"

"Well, he was always out to beat his brother at everything. When Wayne drank, Garrison got drunk. When Wayne shacked up for a week with one of Miami's young debutantes, Garrison got caught raising ruckus in a whorehouse. Always trying to 'one up' his brother. But if he's doing anything shady these days, it's all underground now."

"And how do you figure the judge's disappearance — personally?"

Gentry shrugged. "Personally? I got no personal opinions. We're looking at Rivera, that drug runner-cum-murderer. We're waiting for ransom notes. That's about it. There isn't a single lead. The only thing out of place at Delos' home was a broken light bulb on the back porch."

Shayne eyed the chief sharply. "You're holding out on me, Will."

Gentry paused, then nodded. "There was one other thing. About two drops of blood on the back steps. Hardly enough to test, but they could have been Margaret Delos' type. Doesn't indicate a thing," he added quickly.

"And that's it?"

"That's it. Really. All of it. We've got nothing definite."

"I understand Delos was looking into some graft case. Anything there?"

The police chief's face reddened. "Not a damned thing. The cop was

on the take. We caught him first and canned him. Delos was handling the lawyer behind it. That cop wouldn't get back on the force if a hundred judge's disappeared, and if the Supreme Court ruled him white as snow. And that bum lawyer that paid him off wasn't about to get away with it. Delos would have had him disbarred in another week. There's hardly a judge in town that wouldn't do the same. No, there's absolutely nothing there, and the rest of Delos' case load is about as two-bit as you can get. Not another case worth thinking about, unless you feel a couple of prostitutes might have contracted him out."

Shayne grinned, easing the tension his question had raised. "Then that's it. Keep me posted, Will."

The police chief growled as Shayne loped out of his office.

ROURKE HAD OBVIOUSLY DONE HIS WORK WELL. BY THE time the afternoon editions of the *Miami Daily News* hit the stands they featured photos of Mike Shayne and Helen Delos, the headline announcing Shayne's entry into the case.

The redheaded detective hardly noticed the glaring headlines as he fitted the key to his ignition. The drive back to his Flagler street office was uneventful, but as Shayne got out of his car, a blank faced Latino youth ambled up to him.

"You Michael Shayne?" he drawled.

"That's me."

The adolescent grinned. "I got a message for you, Gringo. You lay off the Delos case. Start-ting now." He punched Shayne in the chest with one finger. "That's N.O.W., now!" he emphasized.

Shayne grabbed the boy by the shoulder, his fingers digging into the boy's bony flesh. "Who sent you, punk?" he asked menacingly..

The boy's eyes widened in pain and fear. "Hey, man, I don't know nothing. Lay off. I was just paid to tell you ta lay off, see." He tried to wriggle out of the detective's grasp.

Shayne's grip tightened. "Who paid you?"

"I don't know, I tell ya. I mean this guy slips me ten and says pass the message. I never saw him before. I figured it was an easy ten."

Shayne relaxed his grip. "What'd he look like?"

The dull look returned to the Latino's face. "I don't know. I didn't notice. Big guy, fat maybe. Didn't look like he was a score, you know, man? I mean, square, but not a score. Not the type to tip a guy or give a man a quarter. Now look, I don't want no trouble. I just told you the message. Anybody asks, I told you."

"Beat it, punk," Shayne growled. The youth backed away, then

ambled off. The blank look, the walk, the whole attitude told Shayne that the kid was useless for information. "Too far off in space," the detective knew. "Stoned."

Lucy Hamilton got up from her desk as her boss entered the office. "Mail as dull as ever, Michael," she said. "Anything new on the Delos case?"

"Just a couple of details, and a warning, Angel."

"A warning?"

"Some punk, stoned on grass, picked up an easy ten. Told me to lay off. Guess Rourke's story is getting somebody riled. But I'm curious. That was a pretty amateurish act. So what kind of guy is smart enough to steal a judge, and dumb enough to try that movie flim flam?"

Lucy looked at Shayne. "A real pro, trying to throw you off the scent?"

"Or a real amateur who had his big plan interrupted and is panicked," Shayne guessed?

Either way, it meant trouble.

III

THE BUNGALOWS AT PALIMPSET BAY SQUATTED AMONG THE cool green shrubberies lining the sunlit street that paralleled the actual bay — very quiet, very private.

Shayne parked his Buick in front of the Delos home, and strode along the brief walk to the veranda that circled the house. He didn't expect a response to his knock on the front door, and got none. The police padlock on the front door looked like an obscene intruder. Shayne circled the house. The Bay sparkled in the bright light. A few yards from the back porch, down three steps and a gentle incline, a small floating dock rested on the quiet water. Shayne looked at the chalk mark on the walk at the foot of the stairs. It told him nothing.

There was a padlock on the back door, too.

Standing beneath the remnants of the shattered porch light, Shayne visually measured the distances between the Delos bungalow and those flanking it. Unless there had been a great deal of noise, it wasn't likely that any sounds had carried the distance. What sounds might have carried would have been muffled by the shrubs that blanketed the intervening spaces.

The detective knew that Gentry's men would have questioned the neighbors, but he decided to ask a few questions of his own. It wouldn't have been the first time the cops had missed a few things by not asking the right questions.

A walkway along the beach connected all the bungalows. Shayne decided to begin with the house to the north.

As he neared it, he spotted a slender, elderly woman sitting in a rocker, reading.

"Hello, there," Shayne called out. There was no answer. A little puzzled, he stepped up to the back porch, an almost identical replica of the one he had just left.

The woman looked up from her book. For a moment, she appeared startled, but then her face relaxed. "Hello?" she said in a questioning tone.

"My name's Mike Shayne," the detective introduced himself. "I've been hired to investigate the Delos disappearance."

"And I'm Annjanette Ridenhour," responded the woman. "I've been wondering when you would come."

"You expected me?" Shayne asked, seating himself in a chair next to Annjanette.

She grasped his arm. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. You see, I'm deaf, and you'll have to look directly at me. I can read lips quite well."

"You expected me?" Shayne repeated his question, looking directly into the worn face.

"Well, someone from the police. Someone official."

Surprised, Shayne snapped. "You mean no one has talked to you?"

"No, no one. I suppose it's because I'm deaf. Everyone in Palimpsest Bay knows that. Perhaps they think I don't know anything. But I do."

"About the Delos disappearance?"

Annjanette leaned toward Mike Shayne conspiratorially. "It was murder. I'm sure it was murder. And I saw the man who did it. Who else could it have been?"

Shayne's thoughts raced. For whatever reason, Gentry's men had not interviewed this woman. Or had they? Maybe they had, and had her down for a crackpot.

Whatever their reasoning, Shayne wanted to hear what she had to say. "Go ahead," he said. "Tell me about it. From the start."

Annjanette looked both satisfied and excited. "I saw your picture in today's paper. It's in the house right now. You're really an important man, aren't you."

"I like to think so. But tell me what you saw."

"What I saw." Annjanette's face wrinkled into a thoughtful frown. "Well, I saw enough. I was out for my walk. I go for a walk every night. I had just started. It was the night they disappeared. There was a boat at their mooring. One of those little launches, a respectable-sized sailboat. You know the kind. I'd say it was about fifteen feet long. They rent them to tourists. You know the kind. They have one sail, and a



small cabin, and a motor sometimes.

"I thought it was strange. I mean, the Deloses don't have a boat. And it was moored right at their float. I could see someone sitting where the passengers sit. You know, to sun themselves.

"He was loading a shotgun. Or a large, two-barrelled rifle. I couldn't swear it was a shotgun. But it was bent in half, and I could see him poking something into it, like a shotgun shell. My father used to hunt with a shotgun."

There was a long pause. Annjanette's look of satisfaction changed to one of anticipation.

"You saw him loading a shotgun, or what appeared to be a shotgun. And then?"

"That was all, Mr. Shayne. I turned around and came home."

A little disappointed, Shayne asked if Annjanette could describe the man.

"Certainly. He was right in the light."

"Light?"

"From the Delos' porch. They always left it burning at night." Shayne lifted his eyebrows. So the light had been in good working order that night. "Oh, yes. I could see quite clearly. I may be deaf, but I'm gifted with very good eyesight."

The detective nodded an acknowledgement. "So what did he look like?"

"Very heavy set. Fat, I'd say. What my father used to call corpulent. He had a very ruddy face. Even in that light, I could tell that. So perhaps he has high blood pressure. He certainly didn't look like the type to be sunburned. He was dressed wrong, too. A suit. Hardly the thing for sailing, even in the best of weather, on such a small boat.

"He was clean shaven, and his eyes were broad set, but very piggy — porcine — in appearance. Standing up, I would say he would be about my height, perhaps a few inches taller, but not much. I'm five-foot-eight.

"He frightened me. He was in such a hurry. And it was all wrong. I mean, him there at that time of night. Almost nine. No one goes visiting at that time of night. And he looked so . . . so . . . so selfish. Like he would think nothing of killing someone."

"And the police never asked you about all this?"

Annjanette looked slightly angry. "Not a question. They talked to Mildred. Mrs. Pierce. She lives south of the Delos. She's quite a gossip. I'm sure she told them I was deaf and alone. They probably

thought it useless to talk to me. But I'm not sightless. Nor witless. I have my sight and all my wits, and I saw what I saw."

"I'm sure you did. You make an excellent witness. Was there anything else?"

"Not right away. But I was standing on my back porch. At the railing there behind you. And the light went out. The light at the Deloses. That was very unusual. I saw the next morning that it was broken. I'm sure the murderer broke it. It was murder, wasn't it?"

Shayne had a hunch the old lady was right. He nodded. "From what you tell me, it looks like murder is the answer."

"But it isn't, Mr. Shayne. Murder isn't an answer. Murder is no answer. It is simply senseless."

Shayne couldn't have agreed more. He stood up, and, facing Annjanette, took her hand. "I want to thank you, Ma'am. This is valuable information. I know the police will want to hear it. I'll send them out to you. In the meantime, don't go telling too many others. If it is murder, your life could be in danger. Tell it to the police, and no one else."

Annjanette looked concerned for a moment, but then her face cleared. "Yes. I should have thought of that. I'm sure he didn't know I saw him. And it's best he not find out, until we know who he is. You are quite right. As my father used to say, 'Silence is golden.' I certainly think that applies in this case."

Shayne's interview with the Pierces and the other neighbors went quickly. All had talked with the police. None had seen or heard anything. Apparently, the people of Palimpsest Bay lived the philosophy of early to bed and early to rise.

But Annjanette Ridenhour's testimony had been enough. It was the first solid lead in the case, and the redheaded detective knew it was the most valuable testimony possible. She hadn't told too much, and hadn't elaborated. She had seen, she had given it some thought, and she had reached a logical conclusion. She'd go over well on a witness stand.

Although Shayne was excited, he had been disarmed by the plodding work of questioning so many unseeing, unhearing neighbors, and he was unprepared for the car.

HE HAD PULLED ONTO HIGHWAY A1A HEADING BACK INTO Miami, and had just picked up speed, when the car came barrelling down behind him. It swung into the next lane, as if to pass him, then

suddenly swerved toward Shayne's Buick. Shayne had time only to notice the set face of the driver before he jerked the wheel to the right, the Buick's tires screeching at the sudden shift rightward. The right-front tire hit the shoulder of the highway, and as Shayne spun the wheel leftward to regain the asphalt, the right rear tire spun briefly in the dirt at the side of the road. For a split second the heavy car was out of control, spinning in a forty-five degree arc, almost tipping, and then ground to a halt, the smell of burning rubber wafting upward from the bruised tires.

More rubber burned, as Shayne gunned the engine and turned the car back into traffic. Ahead of him, he could see the rear of the car that had almost hit him.

The look on the driver's face told Shayne that the "accident" had been deliberate. The speedometer hit sixty, then seventy and neared eighty.

The Buick was gaining on the attack vehicle, when the other driver suddenly crossed the slow lane and exited the highway.

He ran the stop sign at the end, and tires screeched as he made a fast right and dodged into the traffic on the boulevard.

A small delivery van passed the intersection as Shayne's Buick followed the path of the other car. Traffic in the other lane made it impossible for the detective to pass the van. He fumed, knowing this gave the driver who had almost killed him time to get away. Nevertheless, at the first opportunity, Shayne passed the van. There was no sign of the other car.

Shayne slowed down. How long had the other car been behind him? How much did its driver know? Shayne pulled into the next service station, and raced to the telephone.

Quickly inserting a dime, he dialled the police. When Gentry answered his extension, Shayne spoke rapidly. "Get a man over to Annjanette Ridenhour's now," he stated emphatically. "She's got quite a bit to tell you. She's the old lady in the bungalow north of the Delos'."

"But she's deaf," Gentry objected.

"But not blind," Shayne countered. "And she saw plenty. Enough to put her life in danger if anyone finds out. It looks like murder. And someone just tried to kill me. They may be going for her now. So get your men there right away."

"Gotcha," Gentry said succinctly. Shayne could hear him barking orders to someone standing nearby. The chief came back on the line.

"Now what's this about someone trying to kill you?"

"Tried to run my car off the road. I've got a hunch they'd have shot me if they'd succeeded. Didn't get the plate number, but it's a blue Chevy. The driver was a male Caucasian, about forty, forty-five. Average build and a face like a bulldog. A boxer maybe. One who lost more fights than he ever won."

"You want to file a report?"

"No, not yet. Later. I think I've seen this guy. Hangs around downtown in some scummy areas, if it's who I think it is. Punk by the name of Ernie Thomas. Pimp. Maybe some drugs. But I'll check that out. You just take care of Ridenhour. She's quite a lady."

"There's a car there by now," Gentry grunted.

IV

SHAYNE SURVEYED THE SCENE IN THE DIM BAR, HIS CRAGGY eyebrows knitted in a frown. At two in the afternoon, there was already a small collection of nondescript characters in the place, dragging out the emptiness of their lives with liquid filler.

"Jam" was the bartender on duty. He knew Shayne from the streets. Close mouthed, leaning idly on the bar, glancing at a paper in front of him, he lifted his pudgy face as the detective strode over to him. His eyes peeked out from forever-half-furled eyelids. "Yeah?" he growled.

"I'm looking for Ernie Thomas. Got a personal message for him," Shayne said.

"He ain't been in. Not for a week," Jam responded, returning his gaze to his paper.

Shayne's hand shot out, grabbing Jam by the collar and lifting the unblinking face upward. For a moment the two men stared at each other, then Jam looked downward. "He was in yesterday," the bulky man amended.

"He made a mistake, Jam. I want to talk to him about it. Where's he likely to be at?"

"Try that topless place across the street. One of his girls works there in the afternoons. Her name's Dallas."

Shayne released the man. "Thanks, Jam." The bartender returned to reading his newspaper, as Shayne turned and strode out of the bar.

Soap's was as scummy-looking on the inside as it was on the outside. A skinny, listless girl stood on a small raised stage, wriggling disinterestedly to the sounds of a current rock group. Two boys who hardly seemed to be out of their adolescence ogled her from a frontside

table, a pitcher of beer between them.

At the bar, a young black dressed in a flashy zoot suit outfit caressed a shotglass of whisky.

From a back room, a beefy looking man lugging a case of beer, shuffled behind the bar. He sat the case down on a low counter, and spotted Shayne. He moved to Shayne's end of the bar and eyed the clean-cut detective suspiciously. "You want somethin'?" he growled.

"Looking for Ernie Thomas."

"He ain't in. And that chick of his ain't in either. You can tell him she's out. Nobody misses a show here and stays hired. Now if you ain't drinkin', beat it. I got work to do."

Shayne grinned at the man's sour brevity. "Set me up with a Martel," he ordered. The bartender hesitated for a moment, then pulled a bottle of the liquor from the back row. Blowing dust off the top, he measured out a full shot, and slapped it down in front of Shayne.

"Buck fifty," he stated.

Shayne laid a twenty on the counter. "I want to get a message to Ernie."

The bartender eyed the twenty greedily, then flickered a frown across his grizzled face. "I tole ya, he ain't in. Since his chick didn't show, I s'pose they're holed up somewhere or he found bigger and better places. Or maybe he just don't like his ladies workin' afternoon gigs. I don't know. What's more, mister, I don't really care. Maybe Lisa can help you," he added, jabbing a finger at the girl on stage. "I can't, and probly wouldn't if I could. You a narc?"

"Private eye," Shayne answered. "I'm around this neighborhood from time to time." The bartender counted out the detective's change. "Check me out, bimbo. You're new. We'll get to know each other if you stick around."

With a grunt, the bartender turned and shuffled back into the dark confines at the rear of the bar.

SHAYNE WATCHED LISA AS SHE FINISHED HER NUMBER. SHE added a little life to the ending as she noticed the handsome redhead gazing at her. Shayne lifted his glass and grinned at her. She smiled back.

Her number over, she hopped the short distance down from the stage, and crossed over to Mike Shayne, her tiny breasts unable to match the wriggle in her solid, thin hips. "Hi, stud," she murmured. "You looking for something?"

"For somebody," Shayne responded, as the slender brunette lifted a scarf from the end of the bar and began tying it around her chest.

"Oh," she said with disappointment.

"The bartender said you might know where Dallas or Ernie Thomas were."

"Not me," Lisa answered. "And if I did, why should I tell you? You a cop?"

"I'm a private eye, and I'm looking for Ernie. Got some personal things I want to discuss with him." He slid a new twenty into Lisa's makeshift bra top.

"A detective, huh," she murmured. "Hey, you know, I think I seen you. Maybe in the papers? Maybe today?" She looked thoughtful in a doleful imitation of the late Marilyn Monroe, her lips pursed, her eyes wide. "Well, I don't know, I mean, Dallas only worked here a week. Nights, till today. She didn't show today. So I have to do the afternoon gig and tonight's too. But maybe she'll come in later."

"Maybe she will. If you see her, tell her I'm looking for Ernie."

"You really are a detective," Lisa said, again thoughtful. "I know! You're Mike Shayne, aren't you?"

"The same," Shayne answered, amused at the excitement in Lisa's voice.

"Gee, you're big time! I wonder . . ." She fell silent.

Shayne looked at her. He knew something was troubling this girl. He gave her time to think it over. Finally she spoke again. "If I see Dallas, I'll tell her." She crossed quickly over to the jukebox and put in one of the half-dollars laying on its rim. The sounds of a loud acid rock number filled the stale bar, and Lisa sauntered back to the stage, her audience of two leering at her.

Shayne downed his cognac, and strode back into the fresh sunlight of the Miami day, taking a deep breath of the hot, sea-washed air.

He hadn't gotten very far, but he knew that in the few stops he had made, especially the last two, that Ernie Thomas would be well aware that Shayne was hunting for him. And so would every stoolie in Miami. He knew it would now only be a matter of time before someone would contact him and clue him in to the pimp's whereabouts.

Swinging a U-turn, Shayne pointed the Buick eastward to Miami Boulevard, swinging a right toward Flagler street.

LUCY HAMILTON WAS ON THE PHONE AS MICHAEL SHAYNE

entered the office. "Just in time, Michael," she said. "Tim Rourke's on the line."

Shayne took the receiver from Lucy in his heavy hand. "Yeah," he queried.

Rourke's voice came across the line. "Mike, I don't know if this is anything worth knowing or not, but there's a hustler by the name of Jasper Caldwell who seems to be missing. He's a pretty solid name in the dope rackets around here. Came in from New York about a year ago and has been going heavy ever since. Word's out that he disappeared the same day Judge Delos took a hike.

"Caldwell's been living clean. Nothing going for him but dope. No stable of ladies, no pinball stuff, strictly dope. The heat isn't on him particularly, so his disappearance is considered strange.

"He's an official missing person. The lady filing the report is a go-go dancer at a place called Soap's, name of Lisa West."

Shayne lifted one bristly red brow as he heard this. "I just met the lady," he said into the instrument.

Rourke's whistle came across the line. "You're working fast, Mike."

"Not as fast as I'd like to. Matter of fact, I met Lisa by accident, looking for Ernie Thomas; you know, the pimp. He's gone underground, too."

"That's three down."

"At least," the detective responded.

He had hardly hung up the phone when it rang again. "Michael Shayne's office," he heard Lucy say as he crossed to his desk. "One moment."

Lucy called after the detective, "It's a Lisa West, for you *Mister* Shayne," she said, a note of jealousy in her voice.

"I'll take it here, Angel," the detective said, grinning. Again, he picked up the receiver. "Shayne here," he growled.

"Mr. Shayne, this is Lisa. You know. We just met."

"I remember, doll. What's happening?"

"I need some help. Can you meet me in about an hour? Here at the bar?"

"Sure. Can you tell me what it's about?"

"You're working on the Delos case, aren't you? Your picture was in today's paper. I was right, I'd seen it. Well, my boyfriend, Jasper Caldwell, he disappeared at that time. I'm worried. I didn't think of any connection at the time, but maybe there is one. See, Jasper and I were going to get married. He was going to take me to New York.

He . . . He was planning some sort of job, Mr. Shayne, and I just know it wasn't legal, and I think he's been hurt. Maybe it's what you were looking for. I want to talk with you."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes," Shayne said bruskiy.

Panic was in the girl's voice as she responded. "No, no. Make it an hour. Here at Soap's. I'll be here. I gotta go now." The phone clicked and went suddenly dead.

Shayne pondered the receiver in his hand, and then quickly made up his mind. He strode to the outer office and, giving the frowning Lucy Hamilton a grin, said "I'll be back soon, Angel." A paperback book bounced off the door as he closed it behind him.

SHAYNE COVERED THE DISTANCE BACK TO SOAP'S IN JUST under fifteen minutes, switching off the engine and braking to a gentle stop in front of the bar he had recently left.

Inside, the stale smell was all that remained. The customers were gone, and the bartender was nowhere in sight. Neither was Lisa West.

Shayne strode quickly to the rear of the bar. A grimy door blocked the way to the rest of the building. He pushed it open. The bartender of the afternoon turned around, a guilty look on his face as he recognized his customer.

"Where's Lisa?" Shayne growled.

"She left," the bartender said, fear definitely in his voice. "Look, I don't want no trouble. I just work here."

Shayne grabbed the man by the shirt in both meaty fists. "You won't work anywhere for long, if you don't get clear with me. Lisa called me from here not fifteen minutes ago. Now where is she?"

"Hon . . . honest, mister, I don't know. Big Jim, the owner, he just took her out, not two minutes before you arrived."

"What scared you?" Shayne demanded. "What else happened?"

"Noth . . . nothing. I mean, I think he slapped her. That's all. He fired her. I heard him tell her she was done. Not to come back. Then they both left. Together. Honest, I don't know what's happening."

"Let him go," said a new voice from behind Shayne. The detective dropped the shivering bartender, and started to turn. A heavy fist cuffed the side of his head. Shayne grimaced from the blow.

As he lifted his hands to defend, thick arms wrapped themselves around him. Unceremoniously, he was hustled back to the front of the bar.

The ape who had grabbed him dropped him to the floor. Shayne

barely managed to keep his equilibrium from the force of the drop.

"Big Jim don't like punks messing with his employees, Red," said the bigger of the two. "You just beat it. And don't come back."

Shayne decided not to take on both men. He walked out of the bar in silence, their glares following him. He didn't need to question the two goons. He knew who Big Jim was. Big Jim Schultz owned a dozen seedy bars in Miami and mingled on a first name basis with every two-bit pimp and hustler on the street. With no personal criminal record, his clientele couldn't say the same. He had need of two husky bouncers at every establishment he operated.

The questions Shayne had now could be answered best by Lisa West. Shayne got her address easily enough from the phone book in the booth nearby. It was less than a block away.

V

THE HALLWAY WAS HOT AND ONLY DIMLY LIT BY THE OUTSIDE glare which struggled through the greasy window and the unshaded low-wattled bulb. It was just as well. The musky odor that cloaked the shabby walls and rose with the dust from the threadbare carpet told its own story of countless transients and winos who had passed and stumbled through the hall.

There was no need to actually see the evidence of their passing.

Shayne paused outside room 210. From the other side of the door came a faint sobbing noise. He knocked, his knuckled fist sounding loud in the deserted space.

The door was opened a crack. Lisa West, wet-faced, one eye already swelling and turning deep purple stared out at her visitor.

"It's . . . it's you," she said huskily, choking back her sob. "Come . . . come in."

Shayne entered the dull brown room. Lisa closed the door behind him.

"I . . . I can't talk to you. I shouldn't. Big Jim said not to. Not ever again."

"He give you that black eye?"

Lisa's lip trembled. "Uh huh."

"Lisa, this case I'm working on is big. I think you know some things that could help me. Maybe so, maybe not. But I think you better tell me now, while you can. Whoever I'm up against has probably killed at least once. They won't hesitate to do it again. How about it?"

Lisa shook her head woefully. "I . . . I just can't. Big Jim said he'd take care of me if I kept my mouth shut. And I don't really know any-

thing, honest, Mr. Shayne."

"But you suspect a lot. And you may have some of the loose ends I'm looking for. If you don't, maybe your boyfriend does."

The girl looked suddenly afraid. "I don't know. Jasper's probably dead. Or maybe he's just gone away without me. Men do that. They just go away. They make big plans and then they just go away."

"I've already lost my job, and I've got to take care of me. Big Jim said I could work again if I cooperated for awhile. But if I talked to you or the cops, he said I'd never work again. He said . . . he said I wouldn't be worth hiring anymore. And I gotta take care of me." Her young and bruised face looked sadly determined. "I mean, Jasper's gone, and now I'm alone again."

Shayne shook his shaggy head. He knew the girl was too frightened to talk at this time, and that pressing her would only add to her troubled mind. He also knew she could be killed if she didn't talk.

"How about coming with me," he said abruptly. "You can stay with a friend of mine. If you don't talk, if you keep all this to yourself, you'll be killed."

"I can't," Lisa said, strength in her voice. "I just can't. Now leave. Please leave. I don't want to be hit any more. And Big Jim probably knows you're here now. He must have seen you come in. He only just left. Please leave."

Shayne knew it was useless. Lisa West would have to hold on to her information for the time being. "Where's Big Jim now?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe back at Soap's. He was there. He heard me call you. Maybe he went to another of his bars. I don't know. But please go. And don't tell him anything about me. Tell him I didn't talk. Cause I didn't. I did what he said, mister."

SHAYNE LEFT THE TEAR-STAINED GIRL TO HER FEAR AND misery. She knew how to reach him if she changed her mind. And he'd give Gentry notice that she could be connected to the Delos case.

At the corner phone booth, the detective dialled police headquarters. Will Gentry's harsh voice came on the line.

"What's happening with Annjanette Ridenhour," Shayne asked.

"Nothing yet," Gentry growled. "My men are keeping a discreet eye on her place, but it's quiet. You're right. We should have talked with her. But who would have figured it?"

"Listen, Gentry," Shayne interrupted. "I've just come from talking with a Lisa West. Her boyfriend's Jasper Caldwell. He's on the

missing list. Went away the same day Judge Delos did. Lisa thinks there might be a connection. So do I."

"Bull," said Gentry. "Piper out of Missing Persons brought me West's story the day she turned it in. He just pulled a fast disappearance, and didn't bother to tell her. So he disappeared the same day. But what connection could he have with Delos? He'd never met him. And Caldwell's never been in front of any judge, let alone Delos."

"There's more here than you know, Gentry," Shayne warned. "Lisa West just got her face pounded for talking to me. I think there is a connection, and I'm going to find it. But I'm worried about Lisa. She hasn't told me everything. You'd better keep an eye on her, too."

"Hey, you redheaded lunk!" the police chief shouted. "You'll have every shamus in town on a stake-out. We're going to need more than you've told me so far to pull men off duty for a two-bit hooker. If she knows anything, tell her to get her tail down here and start talking."

"She's too scared, Gentry. I was right on the Ridenhour deal. And I'm right on this one. You just put a man onto it." He gave the burly police chief Lisa West's address, and hung up the phone.

He slammed back to his car. There had to be some connection between Caldwell and Delos. The police didn't know of any. Rourke would have mentioned it if he had known of anything. The only hope Shayne had now of finding it was to re-interview Helen Delos.

THE JUDGE'S SISTER LIVED IN AN EXCLUSIVE AREA OF MIAMI. Evening was dropping as Shayne cut the engine on his Buick and braked to a stop in front of the commodious Italian Villa style home.

Jabbing a finger against the doorbell, Shayne waited. Soon a Cuban butler opened the door. He remembered the detective from the night Helen Delos had hired him.

"Come in, Mr. Shayne. Miss Delos is in the library."

Helen Delos looked up as Shayne entered the spacious room.

"Well, Mr. Shayne? Any progress?"

"Maybe," the lanky detective said.

"Sit down and tell me about it," the aristocratic lady said, motioning to a pair of chairs flanking a large fireplace.

Shayne sprawled in the comfortable chair. Helen Delos sat in the chair across from him.

"It's looking more and more like your brother's dead," he stated flatly.

Helen Delos' lifted her chin slightly and took a deep breath through

her nostrils. "I see," she responded.

"There was a witness who saw a boat and an armed man at your brother's house that night. That doesn't look good. In addition, someone's been trying to scare me off this case. An amateur, by the looks of it. And amateurs are notorious for killing their victims.

"Finally, I've gotten just a hint that some of Miami's raunchier characters are involved."

"I see," Helen said quietly, her aged face composed. "How close are you to solving this?"

"I don't know. I need some information from you, or from your nephews."

"And what is that?"

"Do you know of any connection — any at all — between your brother and a man named Jasper Caldwell?"

Helen Delos responded slowly. "Nooo," she said. "No, I don't recall ever hearing the name. Who is he?"

"He's a big gun from New York. Deals in drugs. Only drugs. Do you think your nephews might know anything?"

"We can see. They're here now. Shall I call them in?"

"I think we'd better."

The elderly woman pushed a button near her chair. The butler entered almost immediately. "Would you tell my nephews to come here at once," Helen Delos requested in a firm voice, betraying no emotion.

She returned her attention to Shayne. "The boys are staying with me for a time. Until . . . until we get definite news."

"Kind of them," the detective said succinctly.

A smile hovered on Helen Delos' face. "No, not really. The little moneygrubbers just want to keep an eye on me ever since I said I'd spend the family fortune to find my brother."

Shayne gave her a lopsided grin in return for her frank statement.

IT WAS ONLY A MOMENT LATER WHEN THE THREE MEN walked into the room. "Boys, Mr. Shayne has some questions for you," their aunt announced.

They turned to look at the detective, all three faces impassive. Cool lot, the detective thought.

"It's one question, for starters," he said. "Do any of you know of a connection between your father and a man named Jasper Caldwell?"

The three men appeared to tauten simultaneously. The eldest,

Harry Delos, answered for the three of them. "No. No we don't."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to hear each of you say so," Shayne said, a touch of sarcasm in his voice. "Maybe one of your brothers knows something he hasn't told you."

Harry Delos looked irritated, but kept his silence.

"I don't know anything about anyone named Caldwell," Wayne answered.

"Nor I," echoed Garrison.

Shayne noticed the coldness in the latter's eyes, and matched it with his own cold stare. "If you do, now's the time to talk. I think your father's dead."

"Dead or alive, we don't know anything, Mr. Shayne. Are you satisfied?"

"Not a bit," the redhead exploded, suddenly standing. "I can't believe the three of you know as little and care as little as you act."

"Father never talked to us about his judicial life, and we haven't lived at home in years, Mr. Shayne," Harry said stiffly. "We could hardly be expected to know anything that might have been going on. Your rudeness is quite unnecessary."

Shayne snorted. "So you maintain that none of you know of any connection with Caldwell. Is that right, Harry? Garrison? Wayne?"

He noted the reaction in each as he spoke their names. For a second, Garrison seemed frightened, but the cold look quickly returned to his eyes.

"I think at least one of you knows a hell of a lot more about this case than you're telling me. And so help me God, I'll find it out." He turned to Helen Delos. "Miss Delos, can you add anything?"

She shook her head in a negative.

Quickly, Garrison spoke up. "We couldn't be expected to know anything. Like Harry said, Dad never told us anything. We were always on the outside of his life. He and mother were a closed corporation. Harry hasn't been in town for months, and Wayne hardly speaks to Dad. As for me, I have too busy a social life to be involved with my parents. Why, the night they disappeared, I was at a function. I hadn't been to Palimpsest Bay for weeks. I rarely go there."

The gratuitous mention of an alibi struck Michael Shayne as very odd.

He said nothing, but made a mental note to double check Garrison's alibi. The man's face was beginning to sweat slightly.

Shayne stared him down. "I've got no more questions," he said

angrily, returning to his seat.

"You may go now, boys," Helen Delos said, her voice calm. She watched her nephews as they turned almost in unison and left the room. "They'd make a wonderful trio of butlers," she murmured under her breath to Shayne, "but they make lousy nephews. For a time I had hoped . . ." Her unexpressed hope died in the air. "Is there anything else, Mr. Shayne?"

"How'd Garrison get along with his father?"

She smiled. "The alibi. I caught that. They didn't get along, Mr. Shayne. Garrison just never . . . just never fit in. Not with his father's life, and not with his brothers. So much competition, and all on his part. He tried too hard to fit in, to win. Too much effort, you see.

"But they never argued. I'm reminded of Lizzie Borden," the old lady laughed. "When asked if the family ate together, the maid responded that 'they always ate at the same table.' Not quite the same as eating together. And Garrison and his father never *argued*."

"I doubt, however, that Garrison would have kidnapped or killed his father. He's only equipped for petty crime. Maybe some embezzlement, but nothing big and nothing really violent. He simply isn't desperate enough yet."

Shayne caught the hanging quality of the final "yet."

"You think he *could* be made desperate enough?"

Helen Delos puckered her face thoughtfully. "Maybe. Maybe. The way a rodent can be made desperate. If his home was threatened or if he were cornered and frightened. Very frightened. And I just don't see him that way."

She smiled, then. "His alibi is correct, Mr. Shayne. He was at one of my functions. The Red Rose Ball, in honor of a few Cuban women of dubious employment. I suppose half of Miami's lower echelons of the upper crust could testify to him being there."

"All evening?" Shayne asked.

"I was there all evening. And Garrison was in my sight frequently."

"But not always."

"Not always," Helen agreed. "There were several absences, of varying lengths. But you might ask Garrison's wife, Arlene. She's at their home, now. Shall I call her for you?"

"No," Shayne said, standing. "I think I'll drop in on her."

"Perhaps that's best," the judge's sister said. She gave Shayne the address.

"Mr. Shayne," she said as he prepared to leave. "I hope it isn't

Garrison. I hope he's not involved. But if he is, I want to know. And if he is involved, however slightly, I won't be interfering with justice. I loved my brother. He deserved better children."

GARRISON DELOS' HOME WAS FAR LESS PRETENTIOUS THAN Helen's small mansion. While it rested in a fashionable section of Miami, the aura of great wealth which hung over the aunt's house was conspicuously absent.

Mrs. Delos opened the door herself in response to Shayne's knock. She was a pretty woman, but lacked the sense of quality which Helen Delos bore. Her hair was neat, but without lustre, crow's feet had begun to make their mark around her eyes, and her nose was sharp, rather than patrician.

She blinked at Shayne as he stood in the doorway. "Yes?"

"I'm Michael Shayne, a private investigator," he introduced himself, showing her his identification.

She held it momentarily, peering at it nearsightedly, a slight confusion in her manner. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to talk with you about your father-in-law," the redhead explained. "May I come in?"

"Oh, I don't know. My husband's not home. I mean, I'm sure I can't tell you anything." She wrung her hands worriedly.

Shayne entered the room, Arlene Delos shuffling out of his way in a half-intended invitation.

"But if I can help? I mean, if there's something I can tell you . . ." her sentence ended vaguely.

"I understand that you and your husband didn't see much of Judge Delos," Shayne said.

"That's right. We were hardly there. Garrison has his business, and we're kept occupied. We have our set, you know, and it's somewhat different from the judge's."

"I see," Shayne said disarmingly. "You say your husband's not home tonight?"

"No. He's with his aunt. The boys thought she would need their company. But then, he's often gone late at night. He works so hard, you see. And then we have our social life. We're often not home."

"I understand. Tell me, has Mr. Caldwell been here recently?"

The middle aged woman looked slightly confused. "I'm sorry? Who was that you mentioned?"

"Caldwell. Jasper Caldwell." Shayne noted the lack of response

in the woman's face.

"I'm sorry. I don't know that name."

"Well, probably a mistake," the detective acknowledged. "But tell me, I understand that you and your husband were at one of your Aunt Helen's functions the night the judge disappeared."

"That's right," Arlene Delos said, appearing to relax at the seemingly innocent range of questions. "We were. Garrison often goes to Aunt Helen's parties. He's very loyal to her. She's been very . . . kind . . . to us."

"And you were there all night? You stayed until the function was over?"

"A little longer, really. Garrison was engaged in some business. He's an accountant, you know, and has some very important clients. And he spent a great deal of time with one of them that evening. There was much to do. A complicated problem, I understand."

"Do you know who the client was?"

Arlene Delos seemed to stiffen. "No. I never do. That's Garrison's work, and he tells me nothing. May I ask really what you are here about? Surely not about some little function we attended."

"You're right, Mrs. Delos," Shayne admitted. "I was really hoping you could shed some light on a little problem I've got. I believe your husband knows Mr. Caldwell. I simply want to know if that's a business associate of his."

"I see. Well, I couldn't really tell you. But Garrison is at his aunt's home. Can't you ask him? I really can't tell you anything."

SHAYNE WAS THOUGHTFUL AS HE DROVE SOUTHWARD ON Miami Boulevard, heading for his apartment. Twice he'd been frustrated in talking to people. But the very frustrations told him he was on the right track.

Passing Bayfront Park and Flagler, he made a right turn on SE First Street to the side entrance of his apartment hotel, one of a number of such buildings in the area.

Having parked, Shayne rode the elevator to his floor, and strode down the hall. As he opened the door, a bullet whistled past his head.

All his pent-up frustration exploded as Shayne thrust the door fully open. A huddled figure in the dark straightened up and attempted a run for the door.

Shayne blocked successfully, knocking the intruder to the floor. Reaching down, the redheaded detective grabbed the writhing figure

by the belt, and hauled him to his feet.

As the man started to spin around, Shayne's fist caught him on the side of the jaw, sending him sprawling again. The man went limp.

Shayne stepped over him and, reaching out, turned on a lamp by the sofa.

The man on the floor was Ernie Thomas. A thirty-eight caliber pistol was on the floor nearby. Shayne picked it up, balancing it easily in his hand. With his foot, he turned the pimp over. There was no other weapon in sight, and no telltale bulges.

Shayne went to his kitchen and got a pitcher of water. Returning to the living area, he splashed it over the face of the unconscious crook.

Thomas sputtered as he came to, shaking his head against the impact of the cold water.

"Alright, punk," Shayne growled. "Let's have it. Who set you on to me?"

Thomas began to sit up, a pained look on his face. He said nothing.

"You've got ten seconds to clear your head, and when it's clear, I expect some answers," Shayne stated slowly. "And the first answer I want is who hired you?"

"I'm tellin' you nothing, Shayne," the stocky man replied coldly, one hand rubbing his jaw. "Nothing."

Shayne rapidly dragged the man to his feet. "Think about it, punk," he snarled. "I'm just about out of patience. Was it Garrison Delos?"

The punk's eyes narrowed. "Go ahead. Beat me. But I tell you nothing."

Shayne dropped the man again. Pointing the thirty-eight at Thomas, Shayne picked up the phone, placing the receiver between his jaw and shoulder and dialling the instrument with his free hand.

Peter Painter, Chief of Detectives, came on the line.

"Painter," Shayne said, "I've got Ernie Thomas at my place. Get some men over here. I'm charging him with attempted murder."

"Attempted murder," the crook said, startled. "Against whom?"

"Against me," Shayne growled, banging the receiver down.

"I ain't tellin' you nothin', Shayne," the sullen pimp snarled.

"You already told me all I need from you," Shayne said.

"I never said nothin'!" the man objected.

"You didn't have to," Shayne responded. "You didn't have to."

VI

THE NOISE FROM THE GOLDEN COCK DRIFTED OUT OF THE doorway as Tim Rourke entered the lounge. Across the chatter, the

dim lights, the smoke, he spotted Mike Shayne at the detective's favorite table.

The lanky reporter crossed the floor of the dining area and joined his friend, slapping a manila file down on the table between them.

"That's all the stuff we have on the Delos sons, Mike," Rourke said flatly.

"Thanks for bringing it by," Shayne reached for the file and opened it. "Give me a rundown of what's here."

Rourke leaned across the table. "You asked me to bring you anything relating to the boys and any connection with Jasper Caldwell. I couldn't find anything, Mike. But I did find something that ought to interest you."

"What's that?"

"Garrison Delos does the books for a dozen small outfits. One of those outfits is the law firm of Arthur Larkin. It's called Larkin, Inc., but Arthur Larkin is the only one 'in' in the 'Inc.' And Mike . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Larkin's the lawyer who paid off the cop in that payoff scam Judge Delos was hearing."

"I'll be damned," Shayne responded.

Rourke continued. "I got onto it a year ago when the I.R.S. boys were investigating Larkin. Seems he has some unexplained income in evidence that wasn't on his tax forms. A two-bit story about a two-bit lawyer, but the fact that Judge Delos' son was the accountant for the firm was thought newsworthy enough for the junior reporter assigned to mention.

"And get this, Mike. I called a couple of judges in town, and they were surprised. Surprised that Delos would hear any case where his family had any connection. Said it bordered on the unethical, if Delos was aware of the connection. The judges I talked with said they believed that if Delos had known about it, he would have declined the case.

"They also said that Delos was most likely going to push the lawyer to the limit, throw the book at him. Delos was a stickler for clean law."

"Where's Larkin now?"

"Out of town. The cases on Delos' calendar have been rescheduled. Since Larkin's case was in progress, the hearing was rescheduled, moved back to next October."

Mike Shayne gave a low whistle. "That's a lot of breathing space."

"You bet it is," Rourke agreed. "With that delay, and with a new

judge, things are looking a lot better for Arthur Larkin, Inc. Witnesses have a peculiar way of forgetting, and not appearing, and being unreachable, the longer time goes on."

"So Larkin really profited by the judge's disappearance. And where Larkin profits, his accountant profits. Maybe in more ways than one."

"How do you figure it now, Mike?" the reporter inquired.

Shayne gave his friend a lopsided grin. "I don't have the full picture yet, Tim. But this looks like a very big piece of the puzzle."

A waiter approached the two men. "Are you ready to order, Mr. Shayne?"

"Another cognac, and a rye for my friend — and two of the biggest steaks you've got. As usual."

Rourke's face lit up.

"And bring me a phone," Shayne added. The waiter scurried away.

When he brought the phone, along with the two drinks, Shayne dialled police headquarters. Again, Peter Painter came on the line.

"Pete, this is Shayne. Get me any information you can on a connection between Jasper Caldwell and Arthur Larkin. I'll be in soon to pick it up."

"Larkin? That lawyer involved in the payoff scam?"

"That's the one," Shayne snapped. "I got a hunch those two are connected with the Delos case."

"The Delos case!"

"You got it, Painter." Shayne didn't give the man time to respond. He hung up the phone.

When the steaks arrived, the two men ate silently, washing down the rare meat with their drinks.

Rourke lingered at the door as Shayne handed the signed tab to the cashier, and the two men stepped out of the Golden Cock together.

As they approached Shayne's car, a shot sang out, the bullet splattering brick from the wall near Shayne's head.

He ducked, pulling Rourke down with him and slamming against the sidewalk. On the street, tires squealed as a car dug out from a half block away. The two men stood up, warily.

"Knowing you ain't safe, Mike," was all Rourke said as he dusted himself off.

The detective grinned.

PETER PAINTER'S THREADLIKE MUSTACHE QUIVERED WITH

irritation as Mike Shayne strode into the detective's office on the third floor of Miami's police headquarters.

"Shayne," he said primly, "Just who do you think you are, hanging up on me like that?"

"I'm in a hurry, Pete," Shayne snapped. "Have you got anything on Caldwell and Larkin?"

The slender, foppishly dressed chief of detectives almost choked as he sputtered. "Of all the nerve! You make demands, hang up on me, walk into my office like you owned the place, and expect me to cooperate! I shouldn't be telling you the time of day . . ."

"Cooperation's a two-way street, Painter," Shayne said, slowly. "I didn't have to let you in on the trail I'm following. But I did. Now I want whatever info you've got on that bindle Caldwell, and any connection between him and Larkin."

Still sputtering, Painter threw a pen down on his desk top. "I can tell you in very few words. Rumor has it that Caldwell did some errand running for Larkin, and that Larkin reciprocated by covering Caldwell on legal issues when necessary."

"Come on, Painter," Shayne demanded. "Caldwell was no errand boy. What do you mean, errands?"

Painter grimaced. "Caldwell was into drugs, dealing in a big way. Financed out of New York. Larkin was a small time dealer. Caldwell was his supplier."

Shayne leaned across the detective's desk. "The precise word is 'cooperate,' Pete. Holding back on me won't help you at all. Now, that's a lot more than errand running, and I've got a hunch there's more you can tell me. So spill it."

Painter's frustration showed in his face. "Shayne, I think this is something the department ought to be handling, and I don't think we need you to help us. We're grateful for the little tip you dropped in my lap, but let's leave it at that."

"As to cooperation, I could have your license if you didn't give us information on this case, and . . ."

The redhead straightened up. Painter took a step backward. "I think I have that connection I was looking for, Painter," the detective stated. "There's only one reason to put me off on this. It's tied in with that graft case, and with that cop that was on the take."

"Now, Shayne, I never said anything about . . ."

"Painter, I've been cooperative up to now, and I'll keep on cooperating."

"But I'm working on a big case with big people, and little threats don't worry me. I need information and I need it fast. I've already been shot at twice, run off the road, and threatened by some punk. I'm getting close to breaking this case.

"Now you can tell it to me straight, or I'll put the pieces together myself. Your choice."

Painter stood stiffly for a moment, considering what Shayne had said. Always impressed by names in Miami's social register, he knew the Delos family was one of the biggest. Painter wanted to break the case, and he knew he needed Shayne's cooperation to do it. It hurt, but he decided to be open with his adversary. "Caldwell's been clean since he came to Miami. But one of our officers witnessed him at the scene of a transfer of heroin. He made a mistake and didn't bust Caldwell. He tried to shake him down.

"Caldwell turned the tables on our man, and put him on the payroll. He knew a rotten cop when he saw one. Figured he'd be useful later.

"So once a month, Larkin delivered the funds. The cop's name was Riley. He has a wife and three kids. Somehow, he failed to come through for Caldwell, and Caldwell threatened Riley's family.

"At that point, Riley got scared. He turned himself in. He was testifying for the prosecution, but he left town before he came in front of the grand jury. We haven't been able to find him."

"We had his deposition, but it wasn't enough for a criminal prosecution at this time. It was, however, enough for proceedings — disbarment proceedings — against Larkin. Judge Delos was hearing that case."

"So the way we figure it, Larkin or Caldwell hired someone to get rid of Judge Delos."

"You got it figured wrong, Painter," Shayne said sharply, turning to leave. "But I'll give you the details later."

Painter almost danced as he came around his desk, sputtering as he shouted after the redheaded detective. "Shayne, you said you'd cooperate! You promised!"

But Shayne had already long-legged it through the pool of officers in the outer room, and was halfway down the stairs to the second floor landing before Peter Painter reached the hall.

SHAYNE'S BUICK SPED THROUGH THE LATE NIGHT TRAFFIC as he cut down Miami Boulevard, heading for Lisa West's place. He didn't like the way this puzzle was coming together, and he knew there

was some angle that was bothering him. He couldn't put his finger on it, but with the information he already had, he did hope to get Lisa to talk.

He went directly up to her apartment, the hallway looking even shabbier in its darkened state, the bare bulb casting a grime-smeared light over the splotched walls and floor.

There was no answer as he battered at the peeling door. A radio inside was playing softly. One solid heave of his shoulders sent the door cracking inward. A heavy smell of marijuana assailed the detective's nostrils.

Lisa West lay nude on the bed, her face white in the light from the street outside, foam at her lips.

Shayne yanked the limp body up. Her eyelids fluttered, but no sound came from her lips. A needle mark in her arms told Shayne she had shot-up recently. It was the only needle mark there.

Rapidly, he assessed the situation. He knew she was doped. Maybe an overdose. The vomit on the dirty sheets told him that her body was responding to the onslaught of whatever drug had been injected into her veins.

Her fluttering eyelids told him there was a hope.

Crudely, he slapped her a few times, and she responded with another flutter of her eyelids, and a gurgled, "Whaaaa . . . ?"

Shayne wasted no time. He hefted her over his shoulder, and strode easily down the hallway to the stairs, and quickly down to the ground floor.

Throwing her roughly into the passenger seat, he sped into traffic heading for Miami General Hospital. At the emergency room, the startled attendants swung quickly into motion.

They placed Lisa West on a stretcher and wheeled her to a cubicle. Shayne told the attending doctor what he knew, and the man soundlessly disappeared into the cubicle with the now-moaning girl.

Half an hour later he returned.

"That was close, Mr. Shayne. Another ten minutes or so, and she'd have been dead. She's O.K. now, coming out of it fine. She'll be doopey for awhile. She ought to stay here for at least twenty-four hours for observation."

"Great, Doc," Shayne said, his worry leaving his face. "Keep a close eye on her. No visitors till I get back. She's a very important lady."

The doctor lifted his eyebrows slightly, but said nothing.

Shayne went to the telephone and dialled Lucy Hamilton's number. After three long rings, a sleepy voice answered. "Yes?"

"Angel, this is Mike. Listen, I've just taken Lisa West to the hospital. She's O.K. now, but sometime tomorrow she's going to need a safe place to stay. I want her to stay with you.

"Someone tried to kill her. Gave her an overdose. When she comes to, I think she'll be able to tell us some things that might clear up this case."

"In the meantime, I'm going to have a long talk with her erstwhile boss, Big Jim Schultz. That bindle is getting in my way. You stay home tomorrow, and I'll bring Lisa by as soon as she's discharged."

"Right, Michael," Lucy answered, wide awake now.

VII

BIG JIM SCHULTZ LIVED IN ONE OF MIAMI'S SHADIER SECTIONS, but the interior of his apartment showed his wealth, if not taste. Pink and red were the predominant colors, and the cheap looking blonde sulking on the couch and filing her nails added a calendar touch to the whole scene.

Schultz was obviously scared, and it wasn't the sudden advent of the redheaded detective that had frightened him. He had been frightened before Mike Shayne's arrival.

Frightened, and willing to tell the detective why.

"They found Caldwell," he said, lighting a cigarette and nervously setting the lighter down on the massive coffee table. "They pulled him out of Palimpsest Bay a couple of hours ago. I got the word from one of my men."

"Shayne, I'm just a bar owner. These guys use my place. Sure, I know that. But I don't mess with their scams and they give me some protection and plenty of business."

"But I'm not into murder. Caldwell's head was blown off. That's gangland. That's New York, that's Chicago. That's big time. And that's not me. I just want my piece of Miami, a few bars, a few bucks."

Shayne gave the quivering man a look of disgust. "And Lisa? What do you know about Lisa West? She was nearly killed tonight, you know that?"

The fat man started to sweat. "I swear to God, I don't know nothing. Thomas was in the bar when she called you. We were havin' a drink together. He told me to take her off the line, and keep her away from you.

"That's all I know. I swear to ya, that's all I know."

Shayne knew the big man was too frightened to be lying. He almost felt sorry for him as he sat on his overstuffed couch near his under-stuffed blonde. But the memory of Lisa West's pallid face intervened.

Shayne turned on his heels and strode out the doorway. Behind him, Big Jim Schultz nervously lifted a glass of raw whiskey to his lips and slobbered it down.

The blonde continued to file her nails, bored.

WILL GENTRY WAS AT HIS MODEST BUT COMFORTABLE HOME when Shayne arrived. He answered the door with the unlit stub of a well-chewed cigar between his teeth.

"What brings you here at this time of night, Mike?" he asked.

"A case of attempted murder, murder and suspected murder," the detective responded.

"What the hell does that mean?" the police chief said, standing aside and allowing Shayne to enter. The two men crossed the room and sat in comfortable chairs.

"I'm pretty sure Delos was killed," the red head explained. "Evidence says Caldwell was involved, and so was the shyster, Larkin. The lawyer's dropped out of sight, and Caldwell won't be talking. Your men pulled him out of Palimpsest Bay tonight."

"I know. Some of his New York friends must have got him. Typical gangland. Shotgun to the back of the head."

"I don't think this was anything from New York," Shayne stated quickly. "I'm betting it was a lot closer to home. I'm betting it was Delos' own family."

"But I need a connection between Caldwell or Larkin, and Garrison Delos. I've got one. Garrison was Larkin's accountant. What I need now is some evidence that Garrison was involved more deeply than through a set of books."

"Something more personal. Something more precise."

The chief of police heaved his solid bulk out of the chair, crossing to his private bar.

"Painter called me and told me you were sniffing along Larkin's trail." Gentry grinned. "You really got to Pete tonight," he chuckled.

"What has Thomas told you so far," Shayne wanted to know.

The chief frowned as he returned to his chair, handing Mike a shot of cognac, and holding on to his own whiskey.

"Nothing. He's out on bail."

"Who bailed him out?"

"We don't know. A bondsman handed the bail money over, and Thomas split. We questioned the bondsman, and he said he'd been given instructions by some chick over the phone, and the money had been put through his night slot."

"There isn't a clue as to who put up the bail. But I'll tell you this. Whoever did it has cash available. Fifty grand, paid in full." He gulped the shot of amber fire down.

"And you just let Thomas walk out?"

The chief's face grew red. "There wasn't any reason not to. He'd been before the magistrate, bail had been set, and we didn't have any choice. By the time I heard about it, it was over and done with."

"Where's Thomas now?" Shayne demanded.

"Listen, Mike, I know you have a personal interest in this thing, but Thomas would be a fool to try anything now that he's been spotted. He . . ."

"I'm not worried about me," Shayne said. "But Lisa West nearly got killed tonight. And I think now that Ernie Thomas is the man behind it."

"Lisa West?"

"Caldwell's girlfriend. Your men are slipping up on this, Gentry, badly.

"Here's how I see it so far. Larkin and Garrison Delos were tied in with Caldwell. When Larkin was up for disbarment, he began pulling strings. Delos' son is a tight string.

"Delos panicked. Maybe Caldwell panicked. Whichever. But Delos knew he had to get rid of his father. It was clumsy, it was amateurish, but Caldwell's connections almost pulled it off.

"But Caldwell knew too much. He had to be gotten out of the way. That was amateurish, too.

"I think Delos was present at his father's death. The description Annjanette Ridenhour gave us could easily fit him."

"And where does Thomas come in?"

"Right where I picked him up. As soon as I entered the case, someone wanted me out of the way. Caldwell must have been dead by then. Remember, he disappeared the same day the judge did. So Garrison had to rely on lesser talents. Like Thomas.

"And they both feared that Lisa West knew something. So they had to get her out of the way. They tried scaring her, and then decided to just get rid of her.

"I'll bet that decision was made as soon as Thomas got out of jail.

And from the money involved, I'll bet that your men have a tough time getting their mitts on Thomas again. By now, he's probably halfway through Georgia, or some other state, either to join Larkin or just to hide out on his own. And I doubt if Florida will ever see Larkin again, either.

"If I were you, Gentry, I'd have my men pick up Garrison Delos and question him."

"On what charge, Mike?" Gentry said, his red face turning purple. "On what charge? You haven't given me an iota of proof that he's involved. And his name protects him, to a point."

Shayne stood and gulped down the cognac Gentry had handed him. Setting the snifter down, he looked at his longtime friend. "Pick him up for questioning, Will. And see what he does after that. There've been just enough amateurish moves in this ploy to tell me he'll really panic if he thinks you're on to him."

"I respect you, shamus, so we'll give it a try. But," the police chief was quick to add, "you damned well better be right, or I'll have every politico in town on my tail."

"I'm right, Gentry. You can count on it. There's only one thing that bothers me."

"What's that?"

"I wouldn't have thought Garrison would have fifty grand cash on him. It smells."

THE NEXT MORNING, LISA WEST WAS SITTING UP IN BED. HER color was much improved. Only her shaking hand as she lit a cigarette told of her nearness to death the night before.

"I . . . I want to thank you, Mr. Shayne," she said as he entered her room."

"Don't bother, babe," he responded with a disarming grin. At his side, Lucy Hamilton stiffened. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I . . . I'm not really sure. Ernie came by. You know, Dallas's boyfriend. He . . . he said he just wanted to talk. He had some marijuana on him, and he rolled us some smokes. I got to feeling a little high, and he suggested maybe something stronger would help. We . . . we were just talking about my going back to work, maybe at another of Big Jim's places. Anyway, I didn't really notice, but he had my arm, and I felt a sting. He jabbed me with something. I tried to pull away, but I was tired, and my head was all . . . all fuzzy."

"Ernie just laughed. He put something in his pocket. He told me to

just relax, that I'd feel real good soon. I didn't know what he meant. Then my head started swimming, and I . . . I just passed out."

Listening, Lucy's look changed from one of near-jealousy to one of concern.

"I found out something yesterday, though," the thin dancer said. "I found out why Dallas didn't come to work. She was in jail. She called me and wanted me to bail her out. But I couldn't. She says Ernie dropped her."

"Nice guy," Lucy said sarcastically.

"Well, Ernie only knew her about a week. And she wasn't very good. I mean, already in jail. Ernie couldn't keep her on. It's understandable."

Lucy and Shayne knew the strange but strict code that bound Miami's hookers and pimps. Lucy shook her head.

"But Mr. Shayne, I'm scared. Jasper's gone, and I don't know where, and everything's just rotten. I don't know where I can go, or what I can do . . ."

Shayne sat on the edge of Lisa's bed, while Lucy stood nearby. Gently he told the girl of Caldwell's death. He was mildly surprised at her lack of apparent grief.

"I . . . I thought he must be dead. I knew he wouldn't just leave me. But what will I do now?"

"I suggest you tell me anything you know about his plans for that 'big job,' Lisa."

"But I really don't know anything. Except that it was big. And that it involved Jasper's lawyer, Mr. Larkin."

"It may not seem like you know anything, honey," Lucy said. "But what you know was enough to get your boyfriend killed, and enough that someone thought you'd be better off dead, too."

Lucy Hamilton's bluntness hit home.

"You're right. You warned me once, Mr. Shayne."

"All I know is, and I swear it's all I know, was when Jasper was talking to our lawyer, Mr. Larkin on the phone. He said something about it was a hot one, and it would cost Mr. Larkin at least 'five hundred big ones.' And then he said. 'The Delos family is big, Art.' Then he hung up. He saw I'd heard, and he just laughed. 'It's going to be O.K.' he told me. 'We're about to score big. And it isn't going to cost us a cent.' Then he said we could go anywhere we wanted as soon as this job was done." The girl looked wistful. "Maybe he really would have taken me."

Shayne stood up. "And that's all you know?"

"Honest. That's all. But because he mentioned the Delos name, I thought it might be connected. I was going to tell you the other day. But Ernie and Big Jim told me not to. Big Jim said he'd protect me. Huh. Some protection."

"Yeah," Shayne agreed. "But listen. I think you'd better go with my secretary, Lucy, here. She'll hide you out for awhile. In the meantime, Lucy, I think I'd better have another talk with Big Jim. You take care of things here, and I'll check in later."

"Right, Michael," Lucy said.

VIII

LIKE EVERY MAJOR CITY IN THE UNITED STATES, MIAMI HAS its stratified sections. High class, low class, middle class and those sections passing from one phase to another.

The Overtown section is strictly lower class. Following the great influx of Cuban and Haitian refugees, the residents added major drug trafficking to the high crime rate and to the hopelessness that were already its daily fare.

Shayne knew drugs were involved. The clumsy warning from the street punk, the involvement of Big Jim Schultz, Caldwell, and Larkin, and the hints of large sums of money, all these shouted drugs.

When he couldn't locate Big Jim at home or any of his bars, it was to Overtown that Shayne went. He spent the afternoon putting out the word that he was looking for Big Jim. By nightfall, the underworld grapevine had done its work, and information was drifting back to the detective through a half dozen skulking informers. None of it was helpful. Big Jim had walked or run off the scene.

Still, Shayne sat in a booth at Big Jim's scummiest bar, the Chi Chi Del Oro. It was well after dark when a familiar figure walked into the bar, scanning the small collection of liquid drifters.

Spotting Shayne, the newcomer ambled slowly toward his booth, sliding languidly into the seat opposite the detective. Shayne looked silently at the dull face of the Latino boy who had tried to warn him off the case. For a moment neither one spoke. The Latino broke the silence.

"Word's out that you want to talk to a cat named Big Jim," he said blankly. "Big Jim said he wants to talk to you, too. Call this number." He passed a dirty scrap of paper across the table, letting it fall near Shayne's cognac.

"How'd you get it?" the redhead asked, indicating the number.

"Hey, man, don't ask me no questions. I never know nothin'. People want messages passed, they give 'em to me. They know I don't ask nothing', don't say nothin'. It's a way to make a buck."

The boy leaned his head back against the rear of the booth. He was obviously entering his own world. Whatever he'd been paid, Shayne knew, had gone immediately for a hit.

The detective picked up the paper, and walked to the pay telephone near the door. He dialled the number. A female voice answered, sounding sultry but cheap.

"Put Big Jim on," Shayne requested.

"Who wants him?" the voice responded.

"Tell him it's Mike Shayne," the redhead answered.

"Sure, honey, he's been waitin' for your call."

For a moment there was silence, punctuated by the sound of rustling as the telephone was carried to a new position.

Big Jim's voice was a study in controlled fear. "Shayne?" he asked.

"Yeah, Big Jim. I hear you want to talk to me."

"You hear right. I'm in a hell of a mess. I'm out of my league, Shayne. And I'm scared. I've got some insurance, and I think I'd better cash it in, or I'll be cashed in myself. How fast can you meet me?"

"Whoa," Shayne growled. "Just what have you got?"

"Look, Shayne, I haven't got much time. I've got some tape recordings, that's what. No good for court, maybe, but I'll bet they'll save my ass. I'm in the room above Soap's. Just get over here fast."

The line went dead.

Shayne walked back to his booth and laid a five spot on the table. The Latino had slid over against the wall, his face pasty, his eyes closed.

AS SHAYNE EXITED THE BAR, THE HAIR ON THE BACK OF HIS neck bristled in silent warning. He looked around the street, eyes shrewdly scanning the neighborhood.

There was nothing immediately visible.

A few derelicts, some darkened, chained and shuttered store windows, a few battered cars, added their tone to the scattered trash on the street.

Climbing into his Buick, Shayne started the car and pulled slowly away from the curb. He was quick to notice the headlights a half block behind him that also pulled into the street.

Shayne didn't need his instincts to tell him he was being followed.

He eyed the car behind him through the rear view mirror. Though it remained at a discreet distance, it stood out like a sore thumb due to the lack of traffic. Shayne could make out no details of the face of the driver, but the general shape was one of pudginess.

Reaching a main thoroughfare where traffic was heavier, Shayne made a right hand turn. The car behind him followed suit.

Shayne drove very slowly, watching the traffic on his left. As he crossed through an intersection, he spotted his opportunity. He pulled into the second lane, still driving slowly. As he knew would happen, one of the cars behind him pulled into the right hand lane. Shayne noticed his follower trying to enter the second lane. At the next intersection, Shayne made a rapid and illegal left turn onto a side street, pulled a U-turn, and re-entered the main boulevard, moving in the opposite direction.

He increased his speed, now driving directly toward Soap's. The rank amateurishness of his follower was evident, and Shayne was not concerned that the tail was still behind him.

Shayne parked in the first space available near Soap's. Entering the bar, he nodded to the bartender, who recognized him, and obviously had orders to let him pass. Shayne entered the back room, and climbed the dirty wooden steps to the second floor. The hallway was shabby, but brightly lit. At the front end of the building was a single door. Shayne gave two quick raps on the door. There was no response.

He tried the knob. The door swung open. Across the room on a couch sat Big Jim, a grim smile in red below his chin where a knife had carved it. On the floor in front of him was a scantily dressed blonde, her boney face an ugly purple and a wire dangling from her neck where it had been tied.

Silent forms of death.

SHAYNE STEPPED INTO THE ROOM.

The fist crashed against the back of his neck from behind the door.

The redhead spun around, just in time to have his shoulder take the next heavy blow.

He didn't recognize the man behind the fist for a moment, as his eyes watered from the blow he had received. Every reflex action in his taut body responded as he focused his attention on a defensive attack.

He ducked as a third blow swung past him. His right hand doubled into a meaty fist, and rammed forward, hitting the figure in front of him with a heavy stomach blow.

The attacker started to fold in the middle as Shayne's left fist cracked against the falling jaw.

As the man straightened, his right foot swung upward in a vicious arc, catching Shayne in the ribs. The redhead grunted, but maintained his advantage, grabbing the man's leg before he could recapture his balance and pull it back. The man went down in a heavy thudding crash.

On the floor, he spun around and in a scuttling move got out of the detective's reach and stood, twisting around to face Shayne again.

It was Ernie Thomas.

The adrenalin pumped rapidly throughout Shayne's body, and, heart pounding, a look of grim determination on his face, Shayne began a rapid fire series of punches that propelled Thomas backward against the wall.

Thomas was now strictly defending. His arms came up across his face, and then dropped slowly as Shayne's body punches began to tell.

The wind knocked out of him, gasping for breath through his pain, Thomas slid to the floor.

Knowing his man was defeated, Shayne halted his attack.

He stood over the defenseless body of Thomas as the man began to gag, a thick, short string of saliva dripping from the corner of his mouth.

For a couple of minutes the two men remained almost frozen in position. Then Shayne reached down and hauled his attacker up from the floor by his collar, and half dragged, half threw him to the couch beside the body of Big Jim.

"You've had it, punk," Shayne stated flatly. "This is Murder One. You're not gettin' out of it so easy this time. But before the cops get here, I want to know where the tapes are."

Hatred and fear mixed in Thomas' glare as he fought to control his breathing.

"I got nothing to say," he growled.

Shayne yanked the man off the couch, pulling his face within inches of his own. "You may not live to see the cops, punk, if you don't tell me *now* where the tapes are."

Thomas believed the detective. "He . . . he's got 'em."

"Who?" Shayne spit out the one word question.

"Gar . . . Garrison," Thomas sputtered. A look of cunning entered his eyes. "They won't do you any good. He'll destroy them."

Disgust showed plainly in Mike Shayne's face as he dumped the

hoodlum back onto the couch. "Maybe not," he agreed, "But you've already done me some good."

He crossed to the telephone. It rested neatly, inappropriately in this room of recent violence, on its table.

As the detective dialled the police, Thomas smirked. "I'll get a good lawyer, Shayne. I've got some big money behind me. You'll never get Garrison Delos. I won't talk as long as he backs me, and he'll back me as long as I don't talk. And without me you got no evidence on him. None at all. And when I get out, you're a dead man. I'll get ya."

"Will Gentry," Shayne said into the telephone as the police department answered. He didn't bother to respond to the empty threat.

IT WAS THE POLICE CHIEF HIMSELF WHO LED THE PARADE into Big Jim's room above Soap's. Accustomed to such violent scenes, Gentry didn't even pause as an officer handcuffed Ernie Thomas and led him away.

"Garrison behind this one?" he growled.

"Yeah. So Ernie tells me."

"We'll need you in court for that," Gentry said. "Not that it'll do any good. Hearsay, non-admissable, and all that bull. But at least we know who to look for, and that's ninety percent of the game."

"I take it you haven't pulled Garrison in," Shayne said.

"Nobody at his house. He's not at his usual haunts. But we'll get him if he's still in the state."

"Oh, he's here, alright," Shayne responded. "He participated directly in this little scene. And I think I know where to find him." The detective walked to the door. "But there's a couple of loose ends I need to tie up before we get him."

"Shayne!" Gentry shouted as the redhead passed through the door. "If you've got any information, you'd better give it to us, or so help me, shamus, friends or not, I'll pull your license."

But the detective was already thudding down the stairs out of earshot.

IX

SHAYNE SPLASHED COGNAC INTO A GLASS AND TOSSED IT down before turning to face a sleepy-eyed Lisa West and a very alert Lucy Hamilton on the couch in Lucy Hamilton's apartment.

The lights of Miami glittered through the window.

"I need it all again," Shayne said curtly to Lisa. "Word for word, just as you heard it, to the best of your memory."

"But I don't understand, Mr. Shayne. I told you everything before."

"You told me everything you *thought* you knew," Shayne rapped out. "Now I want the unedited version. Trace the whole phone call, everything that you overheard. Not just the stuff about the money and Delos. Everything."

"Michael, wouldn't this be better after Lisa's finished out her sleep?" Lucy interjected, protectively. "How can she recall anything at all clearly now?"

"It can't wait, Angel," Shayne snapped. "Too many people are dead already. I've got a hunch more may die soon unless we get this tied off quickly." He looked sharply at Lisa West. "Now try to remember everything you can, Lisa."

"I'll . . . I'll try. Let's see, I was in the kitchen when the phone rang. Jasper answered it."

"At first I thought it was a woman, but then I heard Jasper say 'Thanks, Art.' "

Shayne looked at the dancer intently. "What made you think it was a woman?"

Lisa looked puzzled. Her face puckered into a thoughtful frown. "I . . . I don't really know. Just the tone of Jasper's voice. Like he gets when he talks to a woman. Sort of seductive."

"It wasn't anything he said. I mean, he just said hello, and then something like 'I need to think about it,' or 'I want to have some time to think about it,' something like that. Does that help?"

"It could. It could help very much. But go on."

"Well, then he said something like 'Thanks, Art,' and 'This is a hot one. It's gonna cost you five hundred big ones. The Delos family is big, Art.' Or maybe he said they were 'big enough,' I don't know. Anyway, then he just hung up, and he saw me, and saw I'd been listening."

She looked at Shayne with a puzzled expression on her face.

"That's all I know, really. That's everything. It's just what I told you before."

"Not quite," Shayne said.

He turned to Lucy Hamilton.

"Angel, get Gentry on the phone. I want him to meet me in two hours." Quickly, Shayne explained to Lucy the details of the meeting he wanted her to set up.

SHAYNE'S MIND RACED RAPIDLY AS HE DROVE TOWARD

Palimpsest Bay.

He was still a puzzled man, but some of the pieces were beginning to fall into place.

The thing that bothered him most were the sums of money that had begun to turn up. Fifty thousand cash, a presumed five hundred thousand in addition to that. Enough money to make Ernie Thomas feel cocky about a Murder One charge.

It was obvious that Ernie believed Garrison Delos could rake up considerable sums of money.

But Shayne didn't believe it.

Not on the strength of Garrison's known accounts. And Garrison surely couldn't be counting on his father's money. That was going to be tied up for some time as the old man's will went through the probate process.

The syndicate had that kind of money, but syndicate ties were notably absent.

No, the mob wouldn't be involved with this case and still let an amateur like Garrison have so much control over events.

There was definitely a piece missing.

And there weren't too many places left to look, and not much time to do the looking.

Shayne was certain Judge Delos was dead. He was also certain that the body would never be found. The ocean hides a multitude of sins permanently.

But that didn't mean his killers couldn't be brought to justice.

It would just mean that all the loose strings would have to be tied off.

Entering the seclusive confines of Palimpsest Bay's tiny community, Shayne swung through the half-moon street that followed the curve of the Bay.

He parked behind the police car in front of Annjanette Ridenhour's home.

A knock on the door brought a burly policeman in response. The cop recognized Shayne.

"Everything alright here, Dave," Shayne asked.

"You bet," the cop responded. "Nobody's touchin' this lady while I'm here."

Shayne gave a lopsided grin. "Sounds like you've got something personal at stake here, Dave."

"I do. This lady reminds me of my mother. Sweetest old lady in the world. A real pleasure to be around. Nobody's gonna touch her."

"I turned around then. I started toward the Delos house. As I passed my own home, I realized that I needed to sweep my walk. It's very sandy, here by the Bay, but I try to maintain a clean walk in back as well as in front. My father always said you could tell dress clean from truly clean by the backyards of people's homes.

"Is she awake?" Shayne queried. "I need to talk to her."

"Yeah, she's up. She's teachin' me bridge. So far I'm into her for a thousand matchsticks." The cop chuckled. "She has a damned good poker face." He opened the door so that the detective could enter.

Behind him, at a table out of view of the door and the front window, Annjanette Ridenhour smiled at the rangy detective as he walked in.

"Care to join us, Mr. Shayne?"

"Later, Miss Ridenhour," the detective said politely. "Right now I need to go over with you the details of that last evening when the Deloses disappeared."

"Well, I think I told you everything, but I'll do what I can to help. Where would you like me to start?"

"Tell me everything you know about that evening," Shayne requested. "From nightfall till you went to bed."

The old lady's eyebrows rose. "That's quite a span of time," she commented.

"It may be important," Shayne stated without explanation.

"Very well," Annjanette said. She pursed her lips and thought awhile.

"It got dark about eight. I was sitting on my back porch, watching the Bay. When it got dark, I went inside. The Deloses were on their porch, but as I recall, they stayed outside. I'm sure the judge did. He was standing at the rail. Maybe Margaret went in. Yes. Yes, I think she did.

"At any rate, I fixed myself a late meal. Usually, I eat around six, but sometimes I don't. That night, I ate late.

"Then, let's see. I started my walk. Right after I had done my dishes, so it must have been about eight-thirty, a quarter to nine.

"First I walked away from the Delos house. I walked very slowly. I watched the lights of boats on the Bay. No, No, that's not right. I watched a boat on the Bay. A single-boat. It didn't have any lights, but its mast stood out, and I could see its shape. And I could see its movements. That's really what caught my eye.

"It paused, then jerked forward, then paused, then jerked forward again. Like it was having some trouble. I wondered about it, but after

the second pause, it continued on, so I continued my walk.

"My father always encouraged me to walk after a meal.

"I stood there for a little while, and then continued on toward the Deloses. There are some shrubs between our properties, and as I neared the house, they hid it from my view but coming a little closer yet, I could see their float. That's when I saw the boat.

"It must have been very nearly nine o'clock. I'd been walking about a half hour. I saw no one else in all that time.

"I looked at the boat because it was so unusual, as I told you. And I realized that there was a man in it. He was either cleaning or loading a two-barrelled object, like a shotgun.

"I don't think he saw me. It was after dark, and I had the rise of the land and the spread of the shrubberies to protect me from his view.

"But I saw him clearly. In the light from the judge's porch.

"I've described him to you. Should I describe him again?"

Shayne grinned. "No, that won't be necessary. I just need to know the details of your walk."

"Very well. I realized something was wrong, but didn't feel any particular danger at that time. Still, I thought it best to return home. I did so.

"Shortly after that, I saw the light go off at the Delos home. That is, though I couldn't see the porch or anything, the beach went dark. And that's everything."

Shayne nodded.

"But there was one other strange thing that day, Mr. Shayne."

The detective became alert. "What was that?" The curttness of his voice was lost on Annjanette's deaf ears, but the intensity of his body was clear.

"Well, it was earlier that day. I don't know that it means anything, but it was strange."

"Tell me about it."

"It was the boys. The Delos boys. They were all there that afternoon. Shortly after lunch time. They only stayed a few minutes, then they left."

Shayne was startled. Stunned. "You mean the man in the boat was not one of the Delos boys?"

"It was Annjanette's turn to be startled. "Why no, I know them all. It wasn't. The man I saw was built almost like Garrison, but it certainly wasn't Garrison. Or if it was, there was something very wrong with his face. It was a much flatter face than Garrison's. Almost not recogniz-

able. Like it was all pushed in. Very flat face.

"But Garrison had been there that day. With his brothers. They drove up shortly after lunch, and then Wayne went into the house alone, and then came out very quickly, and they all left.

"That's what was strange. I wondered why Wayne would come all the way down from Georgia, and then stay such a short time. I thought perhaps the judge and Margaret were away. But you'd think a son who came all that way would have more than two minutes to wait for his family."

"Indeed you would," Shayne said. Rapidly, he stood and started toward the door. He gave Annjanette one last look. "Thanks. I think you've busted this case."

"I'd have told you earlier, Mr. Shayne, but it didn't seem to mean anything. And I forgot about it, really, till just now. I mean, there seemed to be more important things to think about."

SHAYNE NOSED HIS BUICK INTO THE HEAVY TRAFFIC ON Highway A1A leading back into Miami.

As he did so, a medical student finished the basting stitch on Jasper Caldwell's body. The autopsy concluded, the remnants of the shattered, blood-drained corpse were being put back together into a semblance of order.

There was no way to restore the head. There wasn't much of it left. As to the rest of the body, damage from sea water and fish had mutilated the swollen flesh in countless places.

Still, the City of Miami and County of Dade did their duty by the dead man. In the event someone might wish to bury these remains instead of just cremate them, the damage of the very thorough autopsy was repaired.

The medical student worked alone. Finishing off the slash made by his superiors, he rolled the corpse off the table onto a bag lying open on a gurney.

Whistling, he zipped the bag shut over the corpse, and placing himself at the foot of the gurney, began pushing it out of the autopsy section and into the hallway.

Few people walked through this department. There was no casual business conducted here.

Efficiently, the aide rolled the cart and its grizzly cargo to the huge storage room, the actual morgue.

From an empty compartment, the aide pulled out a cold, sleek

shelf, and rolled the body from the gurney onto it.

Still whistling, the aide rolled the neat package into the small dark cave of the storage shelf. A tag attached to the bag identified the remains.

If no one came forward to claim the body, it would be reduced to ashes and stored, perhaps to be given a pauper's funeral.

Perhaps not.

Dade County and the City of Miami always did their best by the unclaimed detritus of humanity that came their way.

Their police systems also did their best by the living detritus that passed through the system.

At about the same time Caldwell was placed in cold storage, Ernie Thomas completed the booking procedure at the main jail.

He had already been fingerprinted, and four sets of the prints prepared; one for the F.B.I., one for the State, one for the County and one for the City files.

A clerk was busily typing up the details of the arrest on a formal charge sheet, citing the appropriate criminal codes in neat blanks on a standardized form.

From fingerprinting, Thomas had been processed through a room where he had been photographed, four copies of two different angles, stripped, examined for contraband and deloused.

Humiliating to the average citizen, the sneering Thomas felt only impatience at the procedure, knowing his standard phone call — courtesy of the City — waited at the end of the line.

The process was the same for everyone who walked through the precinct's confines — for the drunk driver, for the purse snatcher, for the mugger, the rapist, the murderer.

There was nothing personal in it.

Just the cold efficiency of a city at work.

Before being placed in a cell, Thomas was granted his courtesy telephone call. His sneer began to fade as the sound of unanswered ringing continued. Quickly he tried a second number. Again, ringing greeted his effort, but no answer.

The third try was to a bail bonding agency. The voice that answered was as impersonal as the rest of the system had been.

But now Ernie Thomas was sweating.

Neither his lawyer nor Garrison Delos had answered their phones.

The police would have at least twenty-four hours to solidify their evidence.

It was going to be a long night for Ernie Thomas. The bondsman couldn't help on a Murder One charge until after the arraignment.

There would be no more phone calls for a time.

The City and County had done their duty.

Ernie Thomas had received his legal quota of calls.

And Michael Shayne's Buick sped through the Florida night, bringing him to the conclusion of the case, the solution of the mystery.

X

PALIMPSET BAY SAT IN ITS SECLUSIVE DARKNESS. ALONG Highway A1A, the headlights of Michael Shayne's Buick splashed on the cooling tarmac of the highway.

Dark shadows along the edge of the road were blurred, while up ahead the lights of Miami gleamed in an aura of pale yellow, blanking out the stars overhead.

At the edge of Miami, Shayne chose the route that led away from Overtown and into the fancier, wealthier section of the city, a section of beach homes and villas, places whose very solitude shouted money.

He halted his car at the edge of Helen Delos' estate. If he was right, he would have some hard news for her.

And he knew he was right.

He parked the car where he'd halted it. He strode grimly to the gate, and pushed the buzzer. In answer to the crackling voice of the groundskeeper, he identified himself.

The gate swung open, and the detective walked toward the house.

It sat, three stories tall, a solid rectangular monument to the Delos family wealth and respectability. It had stood that way for more than forty years, and would probably stand that way for another forty. But the Delos reputation would not stand so long.

The respectability that wealth had bought had been lost to greed.

The only lights that could be seen were from the enormous entry hall and from the library wing.

Shayne again pushed a buzzer. This time, the uniformed butler responded.

"Miss Delos will see you," he said, prepared for the detective by the groundskeeper. "She is in the library."

"Don't bother showing me," Shayne snapped. "I know the way."

Brusky he strode down the hall, and opened the doors to the library.

Helen Delos looked up from the book she was reading. Despite the warmth of the night, a fire burned in the grate of the fireplace. Air-conditioning kept the temperature livable.

"Well, Mr. Shayne, have you found my brother?"

"Not yet, Miss Delos," Shayne sprawled his lanky body into an easy chair facing Helen Delos. "But I think I know where he is."

"And that is?"

"At the bottom of Palimpset Bay, or somewhere offshore in the Atlantic Ocean."

Helen Delos shivered at the news. "You believe he is dead, then."

"I do," Shayne said simply.

He sat silent while Helen Delos digested this information. Her body was rigid.

"I suppose you think my nephew, Garrison, is guilty of this . . . patricide."

"Among others," Shayne responded. Again Helen Delos was silent.

"Have you proof?"

"Enough. Some of it's in the can right now. Other pieces are available to the police. By now, they are getting it together."

"I see." Again, a brief silence ensued. "And this proof — will it stand up in court?"

"No doubt."

"Can you . . . Can you tell me the details?"

"Most of them, Miss Delos. Do you really want them?"

Helen Delos wrinkled her brow and then responded. "Want the details? No. No, not really."

"But you need them," Shayne said simply.

A look of curiosity crossed Helen Delos' face. "Need them? *Need* them? Well . . . yes. Yes, I suppose I do. There is work to be done if the judge is indeed dead."

"This case has been a puzzler from the start. There was no indication either way as to whether the judge was dead or merely kidnapped. The only clue the police had was a spot or two of blood on stone."

"It could have gotten there any number of ways. In itself, it only proved that there had been some form of violence in connection with the case, some injury to someone."

"But violence is a heavy clue in itself. It told me that whoever was involved was desperate and in a hurry. Careful men don't leave such obvious clues."

"I believed from the first we could rule out kidnapping. No ransom notes, no messages, no contacts . . ."

"Couldn't that still be yet to come," Helen Delos broke into the

narrative plaintively. "Couldn't that be yet to come?"

"It's been too quiet too long, Miss Delos. But there is other evidence.

"I got my second big clue when a young punk gave me a clumsy warning to get off the case. It smacked of the amateur. Yet the start of the case had looked pretty professional.

"Later, someone tried to run me off the road. This was shortly after I'd been interviewing neighbors of the judge's.

"Again, it was the act of a rank amateur. A frightened man.

"Then people who talked to me began to get threats, and a young lady was first beaten, then nearly murdered.

"A thread of drugs began to be visible in all this. While I hadn't pulled it all together yet, some of the characters with information were also involved with the drug scene.

"Drugs would explain the big sums of money that were being thrown around. Drugs would explain the violence. Syndicate men could have been involved at the start and local pushers might have been running scared, explaining the pro look up front and the later amateurishness."

"*Could have, Mr. Shayne?*" Helen Delos asked.

"*Could have.* The one thing that couldn't be explained away was the judge. He'd never been involved with any drug case. Except for a hearing involving a two-bit lawyer who was up for disbarment if Judge Delos had his way. Your brother was an honest man. He was a man feared by many criminals. The guilty knew he would go for the maximum punishment. And the lawyer, Larkin, was the kind of man your brother despised. But your brother was fair. Larkin was having his day behind closed doors. It just wasn't going his way. I think that's when Garrison and his crowd got scared, Miss Delos. I think that's when they started to hurry.

"They murdered your brother and his wife. My hunch is that they were quietly drowned. If they were lucky, they were shotgunned first.

"One of the men who did it, a guy by the name of Jasper Caldwell, was shotgunned that same night, in Palimpset Bay. His body, however, washed ashore.

"He was a pro. Small time, but very professional. My guess is, he killed your brother and his wife, weighted their bodies down, and disposed of them. Then he was killed by the amateur in the case.

"That would have been the end of it, except that you hired me to do some personal investigating.

"And immediately, the fear took over. The clumsy attempts to get me off the case didn't work. Any pro would have known they wouldn't. My investigation seemed to get blocked at every turn. There was very little information available, and the few people who did have information either disappeared or were killed. But two people were missed. And they each had one important piece of the puzzle. They lived in totally different worlds, one in a world of noise and music, of cheap bars and hard thrills. The other lived much as your brother lived, in a neat and orderly fashionableness. A quiet world of quiet money. The thread that joined them together was a thread of blood and money. They formed two ends of a triangle, and for a long time I believed that Garrison formed the third end."

Helen Delos caught the implication. "You thought so for a long time. But not now?"

"Not now."

There was a cold silence in the formal room.

"What is your . . . theory now, Mr. Shayne?"

A hard smile passed across the detective's lips.

"Let's look at that thread of blood and money, Miss Delos. The money first.

"Garrison is a middle-class guy. Lives a little high for his position, but a little low for a Delos. Alone, he wouldn't have fifty grand to bail out a hood. But *someone* had that kind of money.

"Wayne and Harry? Probably. But why would they be involved? Wayne, through the syndicate? Harry? Nice, quiet, settled down Harry?

"Not unless there was something I was missing.

"Now, my original theory was that Larkin was involved with drugs; had been paying off some cops and had gotten caught. His silent partner could have been Garrison. There was a connection there. Getting scared, they hired someone to kill the judge so they could keep their racket and their freedom.

"But like I told you, drugs didn't hold the answers I needed. They just brought in more questions.

"Then a neighbor of the judge's told me something. She told me the three boys had been to the judge's house the day of his disappearance, and that the man who had been seen there that night had a flattened face.

"I believe the man she saw was Garrison. She couldn't identify him, but silk stockings will flatten a man's features, and a strong

porchlight will obscure the stocking. So the witness didn't know she was looking at Garrison through a silken mask. But she did know she had seen him and his brothers earlier that day, at a time when they shouldn't have been there. So I followed the thread of blood that ran in this case. And it began to answer all the questions.

"If this was strictly a family venture, there would be plenty of money. I only needed a motive. That puzzled me. Why would rich men want to be richer? I could see Garrison, but not Wayne or Harry murdering for money. But I already had the one clue that provided the full answer."

Shayne went silent. Helen Delos smiled slightly. "And that was?"

"The woman who called Jasper Caldwell. He kept a tape. Gave it to a friend for safe keeping. I think he planned a little blackmail."

A frown crossed the face of the elderly woman. "I'm not sure I understand."

"That was your only error, Miss Delos. That, and allowing Garrison to be involved at all. He was much too clumsy and much too frightened. That wasn't in your plan. My guess is he also killed Larkin. The police will have to figure that one out. He did it for you."

"Me? What . . ."

"Cut the act, doll. If you hadn't called Jasper, I might never have guessed at your involvement. You had the perfect cover. You had hired me."

"But you didn't *want* me to find the killer. Not the real one. You thought I'd settle for Caldwell and Larkin. What you wanted was proof that your brother and his wife were dead. Without that proof, you'd have had to wait years to touch the money. The attempts to scare me off were pretty clever. It made it seem as if someone else was involved. But they came along too soon after our talk. No one could have possibly known we had talked, except you and your nephews."

"And you have . . . proof of all this fine theory, Mr. Shayne?" stated Helen Delos as she slowly rose from her chair. "Do you really have an ounce of proof?"

"Plenty. And the police will find more. They just need a good starting point. They aren't stupid, babe. A little slow, sometimes, but not stupid."

"Nor are we, Mr. Shayne," the old woman said. "Boys, come in."

Shayne didn't even bother to turn around as the three brothers walked into the room.

"It's no good," he said slowly. "Another murder won't hide

anything."

"Murder, Mr. Shayne? Murder? Why, you'll just disappear. No one will know," the old lady cackled.

"Don't kid yourself, babe," Shayne snapped. "You've got a lot of dignity left. Don't waste it in any silly attempts to bury the problem. You can't run far enough, nor hide all the clues you and your nephews spilled around.

"And you need that money, quick. If I disappear, you'll have to wait around for the police to locate the bodies. Or start from scratch with some other private investigator. Do you have time for that?"

Shayne knew he had hit a nerve with that one.

"I don't know why your nephews were on the scene that day. But I know they weren't acting straight. And they had no reason then to all be in town. All things considered. The only explanation is some sort of deadly family gathering. Maybe to settle alibis.

"I figure the real motive here to be a need for money. For you, mostly. With all your activities, you'd been spending a barrellful. I figure you about ran out of money last year. About the same time you and the judge had one more argument. He refused to supply you with funds, didn't he? And he withdrew from any case involving you and your charities. I figure you're broke, or you wouldn't have tried something this dumb and this desperate.

"Garrison didn't tell you he'd hired a man pro enough to really hide bodies. When the judge and his wife didn't wash ashore, you began to panic. So you called me in. Pretty desperate. And a big mistake."

The old woman glared at Shayne. "You're going to die, you bastard," she spat.

"I don't think so."

The old lady cackled again. "I suppose you've written all this theory down and have it ready to mail if you don't show up at home, or maybe," she cackled again, "maybe you'll tell me the police are waiting in the hall."

"He doesn't have to tell you, Miss Delos," boomed the voice of Will Gentry. "That's exactly where we've been."

The police chief looked at Shayne with a broad grin. "Got Lucy's message, and came right over, Mike," he said. "No problem at the gate." He turned to the uniformed men behind him. "Read 'em their rights. We don't want to lose this on a technicality."

IT WAS QUIET ON FLAGLER STREET. THE LATE EVENING

traffic produced its usual noise outside the office building where a door marked MICHAEL SHAYNE, INVESTIGATIONS led to the detective's office.

Lucy Hamilton was at her desk when Mike Shayne strode in carelessly. He tossed his Panama hat with casual accuracy onto the hat rack.

At his desk, he opened the almost forgotten bottle of cognac Lucy had bought him for his birthday. Splashing a good amount into a glass, he called out to his secretary. "Hey, Angel, how about dinner tonight at the Golden Cock?"

"You've got a date, Michael," Lucy answered happily.

"Give Tim Rourke a call, Angel, and see if he wants to join us. I owe him a meal."

"Owe *him* a meal," came an agonized yell from an offended Lucy. ●



NEXT MONTH
Mike Shayne
returns
in another
thrilling
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DEAD RINGER
by Brett Halliday

Don't miss it!

*Murder never stops — not even for holidays! Neither
does Cathy Carruthers!*

The Christmas Eve Ghost

by MEL D. AMES

DETECTIVE-LIEUTENANT CATHY CARRUTHERS WAS AT HER desk in her Homicide Division office at Metro Central's Eleventh Precinct. Her burly partner, Detective-Sergeant Mark Swanson, sat across from her. She glanced at the sheet of paper he had just handed her, then looked up curiously.

"What is this, Mark? Some kind of joke?"

"If it is, lieutenant, it's a cruel one."

"It looks like a poem."

"It is," Mark told her. "Read it."

The lieutenant recited the typewritten words aloud:

*" 'Tis the night before Christmas,
And the thought uppermost
In the minds of the 'children,'
Is the Christmas Eve ghost.
While the Vanderhilles lie snug,
Asleep in their bed,
The clock will strike midnight, and
— one more will be dead. "*

A frown creased the lieutenant's beautiful brow. "So? What's it supposed to mean?"

"Well, lieutenant, according to Franklin B. Vanderhille, it simply means that before midnight, tonight, another member of that illustrious family will die, at the hands of the Christmas Eve ghost."

"Another member?"

"Yeah. If the ghost carries out its threat, lieutenant, this will be the

third year in succession that a Vanderhille has gone to glory on Christmas Eve."

"At the hands of a *ghost*?"

"That's what the man says."

"What man, Mark, and where did you get this?"

"I got it from Franklin B. Vanderhille, himself. *He* got it from the ghost. He's waiting in the outer office."

"The ghost?"

"No, damn it, Franklin B."

The lieutenant narrowed her eyes in sudden recollection. "Wa-a-ait a second. Not *the* Franklin B. Vanderhille, who lives out in Thornston Heights —"

"You got it."

"Ah, yes. I remember now. There was a bit of trouble out there last Christmas. Didn't a woman fall down a flight of stairs, or something?"

"That's right. But the family denied that she fell — they claim she was pushed."

"Pushed? By whom?"

"By the ghost, I suppose."

"Yes, well — was there something done about it? I mean, was anyone booked?"

Mark shrugged his shaggy eyebrows. "So how do you go about booking a ghost, lieutenant?"

The lieutenant emitted a long, querulous sigh of exasperation. "I guess you'd better just send the guy in and, Mark, I want you to sit in on this, too." As she watched him go out the door, she added, "Scheee. A pushy ghost that writes poetry. What a great way to start Christmas Eve.

FRANKLIN B. VANDERHILLE WAS A TALL, REGAL-LOOKING man. Impeccably groomed in a grey pin-striped suit, he exuded an unmistakable air of wealth and preferential breeding. His demeanor this morning, however, was obviously out of character. He appeared to be afflicted by a nervous excitement that he was not quite able to repress.

"Mr. Vanderhille, come in. Please sit down."

"You are Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers?"

"Yes."

"I've heard of you, lieutenant." He settled himself stiffly into one of the chairs. "You've really become quite famous," he said with flaw-

less diction. "I did not, however, expect anyone so — attractive."

The lieutenant did her best to accept the compliment graciously, but she had some difficulty ignoring Mark's zany *la-di-da* clowning in the background. "You're very gallant," she said as she fought a half smile, waiting until Mark had dutifully dumped his rugged carcass into the other chair. "Mark said something about a ghost."

The man's already gaunt face paled visibly. The pupils of his restless eyes were pinpoints of fear. He looked to be on the quiet side of panic.

"Where shall I start?" he asked uncertainly.

The lieutenant had placed the tips of her fingers together and cradled her chin in against her thumbs. She looked almost to be praying. "Why not take it from the beginning," she said into her hands.

"Yes," he stammered, "yes, of course. It all began, lieutenant, two years ago today, with the death of my daughter. Her name was Samantha. She was only ten at the time; a twin, actually, to my son, Franklin C."

"You both have the same name?"

"Yes. Except for the initial. My father is Franklin A. If and when Franklin C. has any children, his first born will be called Franklin D. My father's idea, to identify the Vanderhille lineage alphabetically through consecutive generations."

"How did the girl die?" the lieutenant asked.

"She died of fright, lieutenant. She saw the ghost." He looked obliquely at Mark, then quickly back at the lieutenant. His eyes glinted insanely. "The coroner called it asphyxiation, of course; and in a sense, I guess, it was. But fright can do that, you see. It tightens up the respiratory system, constricting the heart and the lungs. The child, that night, would have felt herself to be in a grip of abject fear, an invisible phantom hand, as it were, that squeezed, and squeezed, until the breath and the life had been virtually driven from her little body." He paused to wipe his forehead with an immaculately white handkerchief. "Asphyxiation, perhaps, lieutenant. But *death by fright*, nonetheless."

"Where was the child when it happened?"

"In her bed."

"There was no other possible cause?"

"No. None, whatever. Oh — the police came up with the wild idea that she could have been smothered by someone in the house. You know, a pillow held over her head while she slept; or some such

ridiculous scenario. She slept alone, you see. In her own room, I mean. But no member of the family had any better access to her than any other. And, I ask you, what possible motive could any one in the family have to — to kill my little girl . . . ?”

His voice trailed off disconsolately. The lieutenant, meanwhile, had momentarily closed her eyes, a habit she had when deeply engaged in thought. She gave every appearance of being fast asleep.

“Were there others in the house?” she asked suddenly, without opening her eyes. “Besides the family, I mean? Servants —?”

“Yes.” Franklin B. glanced inquiringly at Mark, then quickly back to the beautifully reposed lieutenant. “Yes, lieutenant. We have three full-time retainers. A cook, a maid, and a footman.”

“They all live in?”

“Yes.”

“And they had the same access as anyone else, to Samantha’s room?”

“Yes, but —”

The lieutenant rose suddenly to her feet. She went to the window behind her desk and stood there looking out at the downtown morning bustle of Central Metro. Last minute Christmas shoppers were darting about the streets like ants in a sugar bowl.

“Tell me about last Christmas,” she said without turning to face the two men.

“My mother was taken,” Franklin B. said to the lieutenant’s engaging back. “She was pushed from the top landing of the front staircase. It broke her dear neck — rest her soul. She — she died instantly.”

“At what time of day did this occur?”

“Just prior to midnight, lieutenant. I remember hearing the grandfather clock striking twelve as we came running out in answer to her scream. Oh, the pitiable way she screamed. I can hear it still —”

“And again, everyone in the house (family and servants, alike) had ready access to the scene of death?”

“Yes. And the police, of course, attempted again to obfuscate reality with some inept conclusions that had no basis in fact. They suggested, for instance, that she simply might have tripped on the top stair, or, of all things, that she was sleep-walking, and she had merely lost her footing in the dark —”

“And you find these possibilities unacceptable?”

“Totally.” The man was suddenly, seethingly adamant. “My

mother had already retired, lieutenant, and she was not in the habit of roaming about the house in the middle of the night. Nor has she ever been known to sleepwalk. Not in her entire life. She was lured from her bed and pushed, lieutenant, you can be assured of that." The lieutenant turned to face him then, as he added in a low, foreboding voice, "*She was shoved to her death, I tell you, by the evil hand of that infernal ghost.*"

THE GRIM PORTENT OF THE MAN'S WORDS ECHOED IN THE prolonged silence that followed. Finally, the lieutenant gave a Pegasusian toss to her golden mane, and effectively shattered the ominous stillness that had so suddenly engulfed them.

"Mr. Vanderhille," she said with her back to the window, "suppose you tell me about that poem."

"That's the weirdest thing of all," he said softly.

"In what way?"

The eyes that looked up at the lieutenant were those of a frightened little boy. "It was a few minutes after midnight when it happened," he began, "last night, in the first few moments, as it were, of Christmas Eve day. I was just about to ascend the stairs to my bed, when I heard a tapping coming from the hall study. Someone was in there, using the typewriter. My son, Franklin C. was with me, so don't get the idea that I was imagining things —"

"Wasn't that rather late for a twelve-year-old boy to be staying up, Mr. Vanderhille?"

"It is the festive season, lieutenant, and this ghost thing has upset the boy terribly, as you might imagine. We had just watched Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* on television, which was rather a poor choice of entertainment under the circumstances, but —"

"I understand. Did the boy hear the tapping?"

"He did, indeed. As a matter of fact, he drew my attention to it. It was very faint, at first, from back of the staircase, but as we approached the study it became appreciably louder. Everyone else in the house was in bed, lieutenant, but, clearly, *someone* was in there using the typewriter. I was about to open the door when Franklin C. caught my arm. I've never seen the boy so frightened."

"What happened then?"

"The typing suddenly stopped. I put the boy behind me and opened the door. My God, it was weird."

"What was weird?"

"My son and I were the only mortal souls in that room, lieutenant. But just before I found the light switch, I felt an icy chill sweep over me, and for one horrifying moment, I had the distinct impression that an invisible and malign presence had brushed past me in the dark. I heard Franklin C. utter a terrified gasp from somewhere behind me. A moment later, with the lights on, we saw the typewriter on the desk, which, of course, was precisely where it should have been, but that sheet of paper," he pointed to the poem on the lieutenant's desk, "was jutting out of the machine. Otherwise, the room was empty."

"Is there any other means of egress to the room? Other than the door you entered by?"

"There is not. That study is an interior room. It has no windows, and only the one door. The heat vents and cold air returns are grilled, and much too small to accommodate the body of even a child."

"Could someone have hidden in the room?"

"The only furniture of any size, lieutenant, is the desk. It's of the pedestal type, with one tier of small drawers and the rest is open fronted. The walls are paneled and lined with books. And there are no secret passages or tunnels, anywhere in the house. There was just no way a living creature could have hidden in that room, lieutenant."

"Hmm." The lieutenant nudged her pretty nose with an elegantly-flexed knuckle. "You certainly don't give a lowly skeptic much room to maneuver, Mr. Vanderhille."

The distraught man leaned forward in his chair. He was visibly trembling. "Lieutenant Carruthers, I beseech you. Please help us."

"I'm not sure there's very much I *can* do, much as I may wish to. You must remember, sir, that the sergeant and I are attached to Homicide and, as yet, there has been no crime."

"*No crime?* You don't regard the death of my daughter and my dear mother a crime?" The man was flushed and angry.

"Those incidents, as unfortunate as they may be, have already been duly investigated. It is not for me to re-open the files."

Franklin B. Vanderhille jolted to his feet. "Lieutenant," he blurted, "let me tell you this. I intend to go from here to the office of your Chief of Detectives, Henry Heller. From there, if need be, I will proceed to the Police Commissioner himself. Even the office of the Governor is not beyond me. I am a very influential man in this state, lieutenant, and I usually get what I want."

The lieutenant straightened against the backdrop of the window and she was suddenly silhouetted by the morning sun. Caught in a remark-

able halo of sun-glow, scintillating streaks of light seemed to glance off her golden head and ricochet about the room in a dazzling display of daylight pyrotechnics. The affect was so startling the angry man was momentarily shaken. He fell back a pace, then turning abruptly, he headed for the door.

"I'll have you on this case within the hour," he asserted tersely. And with a show of nervous dignity, he was gone.

IT WAS LESS THAN THIRTY MINUTES LATER WHEN LIEUTENANT Cathy Carruthers lifted the telephone on its first ring and Chief Hank Heller's gruff bark bounced off her eardrum.

"Lieutenant?"

"Chief."

"What's this about you turning down the Franklin B. Vanderhille case?"

"I didn't know there was a case, chief."

"No case?" The chief's voice rose an octave. "You call two corpses and another one threatened, no case?"

"The two deaths have already been investigated, and those cases are closed."

"Then you'd better re-open them."

"Is that an order?"

"It is."

"On Christmas Eve? That's heartless, chief."

Mark, who was sitting on the other side of the desk, groaned. He could not avoid hearing the entire conversation.

"Just think of me as Santa Claus, lieutenant," the chief responded with a mirthless chuckle.

"Or a Christmas turkey," Mark quipped.

"*I heard that*, you overgrown beach bum. I think you'd better go along with her, sergeant."

Cathy Carruthers could not hold back a sudden burst of laughter as Mark did a grotesque mime of a Christmas gobbler losing its head.

"Have your fun, kiddies, while you can," the chief retorted grimly, "but just make damn good and sure that that Vanderhille threat doesn't materialize."

"Do you happen to know where that 'threat' came from, chief?"

"A note of some kind, I understand."

"It was a poem —"

"So?"

“— delivered by a ghost.”

There was a prolonged silence before the chief quietly cleared his throat. “Yes, well — you can fill me in on the whole fiasco, tomorrow. Uh — better make that Monday. Tomorrow’s Christmas. And, lieutenant —”

“Yes, chief?”

“Season’s greetings.”

MARK WATCHED AND REMINISCED AS HIS BEAUTIFUL partner hung up after the chief’s call, then immediately redialed, to ask for the Records Department.

It had been well over two years since Cathy Carruthers had joined the Metro Central Police Force. And in that time, Mark had literally witnessed the creation of a living legend: this stunning, six-foot (with heels) honey-haired blonde, possessing all the sex appeal of a Playboy centerfold, together with a hidden reservoir of such sheer animal strength and cunning that she had been dubbed *The Amazon* by her awe-struck colleagues in Homicide. They had become a credible team, she and Mark, and a deep bond of mutual respect and affection had grown between them.

“I know it’s Christmas Eve,” she was saying into the phone, “and I know those files are closed, but I want them re-opened, as of now. And, corporal, I want *you* to hustle them up to my office.”

Mark laughed as the lieutenant held the loudly complaining receiver away from her. “When?” she echoed the instrument from arm’s length. “How about yesterday?” she said as she cradled the phone without waiting for a reply.

“The leprechaun?” Mark asked.

“Who else?” She smiled wanly. “I guess you can’t blame the little guy. This is a busy time for him.”

“Damn!” said Mark suddenly, holding his hand to his eye.

The lieutenant looked at him, puzzled. “What’s up with you?”

“Something just flew in my eye,” he groaned. “Sonofagun!”

The lieutenant grabbed for a Kleenex and came around the desk quickly. “Let me have a look,” she said with apparent concern. But in the next instant, Mark had pulled her down on his lap and was jerking a big thumb over his head to indicate a sprig of mistletoe that was now mysteriously hanging from the ceiling.

Cathy Carruthers sighed compliantly. “The Kissing Bandit,” she muttered. “I might have known you’d get to it sooner or later.” She

faced him with a crooked smile. "Well — get it over with."

Mark did get it over with. And over with. And over with. And some memorable moments had elapsed before Corporal Leprohn burst into the office and found the two detectives still as one, so to speak.

"Oh my," he stammered. "Lieutenant. I mean, *really*."

Cathy Carruthers, flushed and breathless, struggled to her feet. She regarded the little four-foot interloper with a blend of chagrin and embarrassment. "What's *with* you, Leprohn? You want I should get married before I let someone kiss me under the mistletoe?"

"I'm sorry, lieutenant, I didn't mean to imply that —"

But the leprechaun never did get to say what he didn't mean to imply. The lieutenant caught him deftly under the arms and hiked him up to her own eye level, and there, with his little feet dangling three feet above the floor, she planted a kiss firmly on his forehead. Then she dumped him with a spiteful jolt onto Mark's lap. "Your turn," she said.

Mark obliged, then set the little guy on his feet, writhing and scrubbing at his forehead, and blinking like a bloody owl. "You'll regret this, Swanson," he sputtered.

Mark wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "I already do," he said with an uncharitable grimace.

CORPORAL GARFIELD LEPROHN, OR *THE LEPRECHAUN*, AS he was widely known, was quite aware of the fact that he was not a big man. As a matter of fact, at four-foot-zilch (on a clear day, with the atmospheric pressure in his favor) he could scarcely lay claim to being even a big boy. Nevertheless, he *was* head of the Records Department and, as such, he was reluctantly tolerated for what he did, in spite of what he was — or rather, in spite of what he wasn't. And at this precise moment, what the leprechaun wasn't, was happy.

He sat perched on the edge of his chair like a pimple on a pickle. His little feet didn't quite reach the rung of the chair.

"Lieutenant," he said with pained solemnity, "before we address ourselves to these two case files, I must register with you my utter dismay at the display of carnal plebeianism I have been forced to endure this morning. And, before we proceed any further, I would like some assurance from you that it will not occur again."

The lieutenant struggled with a rising bubble of laughter. "Speaking for myself, Garfield, rest assured that I shall hold you inviolate, henceforth, *ad infinitum*."

The leprechaun turned to Mark. "And you, sir?"

"I don't know," Mark said with mock sincerity. "You're such a cute little bugger, it's going to be hard to resist. But in the magnanimity of Christmas, I'll agree to a moratorium —"

"Thank you."

"— until next Christmas."

The lieutenant held up her hands. "Enough already," she said wearily. She reached across her desk to relieve the little man of the file folders, then sat perusing them in rapt silence for several minutes. When finally she raised her head, she said to the leprechaun, "There's not a thing in these damn files that we don't already know."

"You must realize, lieutenant, that in view of the family name, the Vanderhille *eclat*, as it were, these reports were written with a certain reserve."

"That's putting it mildly. The deaths are certainly suspect, but there is absolutely no suggestion of motive. And no one seems to have even been questioned at any great length, except, perhaps, for the servants."

"What motive could there have been, lieutenant, considering who the victims were? A ten-year-old girl and an aging grandmother —"

"Money?" Mark wondered aloud.

The leprechaun shook his little head. "The Vanderhille fortune is 'old' money, buried deep in family trusts and traditions, secure from outsiders. I tell you, there is simply no motive."

"There is always a motive, gentlemen. Even the absence of a motive, constitutes motive of a kind." The lieutenant flipped a couple of pages. "I see the boy is something of a whiz-kid."

"A prodigy in several fields," the leprechaun volunteered, "especially Physics and the Applied Sciences."

"Mmmm. Interesting. And the boy's grandfather, Franklin A., is an invalid?"

"He was bedridden shortly after the death of the little girl. Some type of cancer. Incurable. He apparently never leaves his room."

"That just leaves Franklin B., and his wife, uh — Candice."

"And the three servants," the leprechaun put in.

"Yes," the lieutenant mused absently, "Vanderhilles, A., B. and C., one wife, and three servants."

"And one ghost," Mark added.

The lieutenant gave him a distant look. "And one ghost," she echoed softly.

MARK PILOTED THE GRAY UNMARKED CHEVY BETWEEN the two monstrous stone lions that guarded the entrance to the Vanderhille estate. The high wrought-iron gates stood open for them, and as he nosed the car up the driveway, it was like entering the Holland tunnel in a new nightmare setting through a maze of towering trees. The cold white winter moon was snuffed from view and did not reappear until they emerged some minutes and a good hundred yards later, into a clearing the size of the Rose Bowl. And there, with turrets and spires reaching into the crystaline, moonlit heavens, the Vanderhille mansion stood like the *Vaux-le-Vicomte* itself, right out of the seventeenth century.

"Mother of God!" Mark exclaimed, "would you look at that?"

Cathy Carruthers sat in awe beside him. She had leaned forward to get a better view as they broke out of the trees. "It's easy to see why Franklin B. needed less than half an hour to get us in on his ghost hunt," she said with a snort of frustration.

Mark glanced at his watch. "Almost eight o'clock," he said, "I sure hope they plan to feed us."

"We were invited, you know."

"For supper?"

"Mark, these sort of people refer to the evening meal as dinner, not supper."

"Oh, yeah." Mark nodded thoughtfully. "I'd forgotten. Christ had the last one, didn't he?"

The lieutenant wasn't sure whether to laugh or take a poke at him. Instead of doing either, she said, "Mark, do you have a middle initial?"

"Yup. M, same as the first one."

"What's it stand for, Mephistopheles?"

Mark grinned. "I wish the Devil it did." But the big grin quickly turned to a look of bewilderment as he spotted a black-and-white sitting alone in the small black-topped parking lot immediately ahead. "Did you order in some uniforms?" he asked the lieutenant.

"Not I."

Mark pulled in beside the police car. Officer Fisk was in the passenger seat. She rolled down the window and turned her head lazily toward him. "'Bout time," she said curtly. Beyond her, Mark could see Mayhew slumped behind the wheel.

"What in hell are you two doing here?" Mark wanted to know.

"The chief ordered us out," Fisk said. "He told us to meet you here at seven." She looked at her watch and sighed heavily. "Can't win 'em all, I guess. Bones and Madson were supposed to be on call tonight, *but* (as the chief gleefully pointed out), they're both married, *and*, we're both single (in name, at least), *and* (according to the chief), *it is* Christmas —" She flashed her big brown eyes at him. "*Humbug!*"

Mark laughed. "I guess we've got company whether we like it or not," he said to the lieutenant. "Where do you want them? Inside or out?"

"We'll decide that later." The lieutenant leaned over the wheel in front of him. "Have you eaten?" she asked Fisk.

"No, and we're starved," Fisk replied.

"Okay. Come in with us and we'll see if we can get you fed." She was about to withdraw her beautiful head when Mark planted a wet kiss on the side of her mouth. She turned angrily toward him and got the full treatment.

"Damn you, Mark!"

But from the corner of her eye, while thus engaged, she could see him jerking his big thumb above his head to where the same, infamous sprig of mistletoe now hung like a twin conspirator from the headliner of the car.

Fisk giggled. "Mayhew brought his along, too," she said.

THEY MOUNTED THE MILE-WIDE STEPS TO THE ACRE-SIZED porch, four abreast. Huge granite slabs, worn smooth by generations of Vanderhilles, paved the way. Looming before them were massive Cathedral doors, adorned with the heads of the two lions that had greeted them at the gate, replicated here on ponderous brass rings.

"Oh, wow!" Fisk cried excitedly, "twin knockers!"

To Mark, in an aside against the palm of his hand, Mayhew muttered, "Are there any other kind?"

With a flamboyant gesture, the lieutenant gave the young rookie the honor of heralding their arrival. Fisk pounced gleefully ahead, took a door knocker in each hand, lifted, and swung them at the doors. Sadly, she forgot to let go.

"Knocker to knocker, bust to bust," Mayhew canted solemnly as the lieutenant helped Fisk to her feet. Both women turned with blood in their eyes, but the doors took that precise moment to creak lumberingly inward, and a girl in a maid's uniform appeared on the

threshold.

She was a petite platinum blonde with a high bountiful bust that made her look off balance, and ever on the point of tipping forward. Her dress was black and short, and she wore a frilly white cap of sorts, like a little tiara, and a matching white apron the size of a dilettante's doily.

To Mark, the girl said, "We've been *ext*hpecting you, Lieutenant Carruther*th*." She curtsied. "My name *iz* Mi*th*ty. Will you follow me, pleathe."

Mark gave his beautiful partner a don't-blame-me look, shrugged, and followed after the girl's long, black-stockinged legs. The lieutenant, Fisk and Mayhew joined the little parade and, single file, like a platoon on patrol, they crossed an immense central hall that would have accommodated the Green Berets on war maneuvers.

Misty ushered them into a room that looked like the lobby at the Waldorf. An enormous stone fireplace blazed cheerfully from one distant corner, and a fir Christmas tree that enjoyed enough latent lumber to reconstruct Noah's Ark, stood proudly and hugely in another. The decorations that emblazoned the tree, Fisk was quick to point out, would have cleaned out Woolworth's entire Christmas stock in downtown Metro. The rest of the room was characteristically sumptuous in creature comforts.

"The *mat*hter will be with you *pre*thently," Misty lisped from the doorway. Mayhew, the last to enter, paused there a moment to admire the girl's oscillating rear-end as she flounced away.

"Watch it, Mayhew," Fisk cautioned him. She wet a finger on her tongue and made an imaginary mark in mid-air. "That's twice. One more slide from grace, and you get the 'Cold Shoulder' award."

Before Mayhew could protest that in fact, all he had been doing, was watching it, the door he had just closed, swung inward, and Franklin B. Vanderhille entered the room with a stately, silver-headed woman on his arm. The woman held herself uncompromisingly erect, with a stiff dignity that made her look as though she had inadvertently donned her gown without first removing the coathanger.

"Ah, good evening, lieutenant." Franklin B. extended his hand. "I'm so pleased you decided to come after all." The lieutenant acknowledged his little dig with a tight smile. "I'd like you to meet my wife, lieutenant. Candice, this 'is Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers, the famous detective."

Mrs. Vanderhille looked down her long nose like Morris the cat the

night he didn't get his 9-Lives. "A lady detective," she observed tonelessly; "how droll."

The lieutenant's intolerant sigh was both obvious and audible. "This," she said to no one in particular, "is my partner, Sergeant Swanson."

Mark nodded.

"I'm glad to see you've brought reinforcements with you, lieutenant."

"Courtesy of Chief Heller," she informed the man dryly.

"Good." He looked over her mini-entourage with critical approval. "We'll need all the help we can get before the night's over, mark my words."

Misty suddenly appeared in the open doorway. "Dinner *ith therved, thir, madam.*"

"Thank you, Misty." Vanderhille turned to the lieutenant. "I trust you will be dining with us."

"Thank you, yes. And the officers?"

"Misty will show them to the kitchen, lieutenant. They will dine well, believe me."

"*Thith way, pleathe.*"

When only Fisk and Mayhew followed the sprightly maid out the door, Mrs. Vanderhille pointed her long snotty snoot in Mark's direction. "Oh!" she said with pained hauteur, "will the sergeant be dining with *us*, then?"

"If he doesn't," Cathy Carruthers told the woman bluntly; "you'd better have the cook set another place in the kitchen — for me."

THE TABLE, IT SEEMED TO MARK, WAS THE LENGTH OF A football field. Franklin B. sat at one end, Candice Vanderhille at the other, and Mark and the lieutenant sat opposite each other, center field. The starting whistle hadn't yet blown when a boy entered the room. He was a gaunt little fellow, distressingly thin, with deep-set, hollow eyes and pallid cheeks. He ignored the place that had been hurriedly set for him, next to Mark, and promptly commandeered a chair beside the lieutenant.

"I'm Franklin C.," he said by way of introduction, "You are Cathy Carruthers, of course. I'm a great admirer of yours, lieutenant."

"Oh? Have you added criminology, then, to your many other talents?"

"No. Not really." He committed her to an overtly frank appraisal.

"I have only recently entered puberty, you see, and I've made the rather delightful discovery that beautiful blondes really turn me on."

"*Franklin C.!*" Mrs. Vanderhille now aimed her intimidating proboscis at her son. "What a *dreadful* thing to say."

The boy eyed his mother dispassionately. "What could *you* possibly know about it, mother?" Then to a flushed and thoroughly discomfitted Cathy Carruthers, he whispered, "Misty takes it as a compliment." He winked connivingly.

"*Really, Franklin,*" Mrs. Vanderhille was livid. "That will be quite enough."

The lieutenant shot a helpless glance at Mark who was having troubles of his own retaining his composure. And Misty took that moment to enter from the kitchen. She was followed by a full-bodied girl with long chestnut hair and a sweet and gentle face. Misty proceeded to uncork a bottle of wine, while her companion, in a somewhat less abbreviated uniform than Misty's, began to serve.

"That's Brenda," Franklin C. confided to the lieutenant in a throaty whisper. "She's the cook. She's not quite the looker Misty is, but she's, uh — just as friendly." He winked again. "I honestly don't know *what* I'd do," he confessed with a weary sigh, "if it wasn't for the help."

Cathy Carruthers decided it was time to divert the young Lothario from his recently acquired obsession, temporarily at any rate, and into matters more relevant to the purpose of their being there. "Tell me," she said to the boy, "what are your thoughts on this ghost business?"

At the mention of the word "ghost," Misty upset a glass of wine over Mark's beef Wellington, and Brenda splashed soup on Mrs. Vanderhille's evening gown. The woman was surprisingly calm about it. "Do be more careful, child," she said to an obviously distraught Brenda, and to Misty, she added, "Set the sergeant a clean place, girl, and for pity's sake, do watch what you're up to."

"The ghost," Franklin C. said gravely, in a suddenly serious manner, "is something we do not talk about, lieutenant, and try not to think about."

"But talk and think about it we must," Franklin B. interjected, "at least, tonight. But first, lieutenant, I would like to take this opportunity to apologize for the manner in which I was forced to bring you here. You must understand, however, our desperate plight. We attempt to carry on, you see, to live a normal life, to pretend that what has happened twice before will not happen again. Our staff (and they

are loyal souls) as well as ourselves, approach this festive night with fear and trepidation. We are in mortal dread, lieutenant, of a ghostly presence that will shortly walk this earth, on this holy night, for no other purpose than to consign yet another Vanderhille to the grave."

"This ghost," the lieutenant asked, "does it ever manifest itself at any other time?"

"It is the Vanderhille ghost, lieutenant, the ghost of Christmas Eve. It comes but once a year."

"What will you do," the lieutenant queried, "when the hour of midnight approaches?"

"That, Miss Carruthers, is for *you* to decide. It is for that very reason that I brought you here. It is no secret that you possess uncanny insight, that you have an acumen of perceptive and deductive thought far beyond the cognizance of most mortals. We, on the other hand, are as babes in the woods, my dear, *toys*, if you like, playthings of the Devil, himself. And I, a Vanderhille, will be in greater peril than my lowliest servant. It is a humbling thing, believe me." He drew a tremulous breath. "Tonight, Cathy Carruthers, we are placing ourselves in your hands. May God go with you."

The silence that followed was electric. The man's portentous words echoed over the table long after he had ceased to speak.

"I shall want to see your father," the lieutenant said, "Franklin A. And your other servant, the footman."

"Yes, of course. And so you shall."

"Are there any others?"

"Only the ghost," Franklin B. replied, almost in a whisper. "*Only the ghost.*"

"TALK ABOUT YOUR STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN," MARK OBSERVED with appropriate awe. The two detectives were ascending the stairs with their host to the second floor landing, where the room occupied by the bed-ridden Franklin A. was located. "Do you realize that if this staircase could keep on going," Mark fantasized, "down, as well as up; it would probably be wide enough to handle the total daily traffic to the Great Hereafter, from the whole of the U.S. of A."

Vanderhille laughed at the rather bizarre analogy. "But do you really think the traffic would be all that great, sergeant?" he mused. "Going up, I mean."

"You do have a point there," Mark conceded.

"And speaking of Hereafters," Vanderhille added ominously, "that is precisely where I hope to be, come Christmas day."

The lieutenant regarded the man with undisguised amazement. "You *hope* to be — *dead*?"

"No, lieutenant," he said with a grim smile, "just *here*, after."

At the door to the room, Vanderhille hesitated. "The man is quite ill," he cautioned. "And he does babble a bit. I trust you will allow —"

The lieutenant waved him on. "I understand," she said gently.

It was a large room, heavily draped in somber colors. The only light emanated from a pale yellow lamp that sat on the bedside table, bathing the walls and the high ceiling in a sickly, anemic hue. Shadows lurked in every corner.

"Good evening, father."

The old man on the bed turned a tired, drawn face toward them. "Oh, it's you, Franklin. I thought it might have been that — that hellish spectre again." His voice was a faltering, fragile wheeze. "It's time, you know."

Behind the pallid-looking lamp there was a real-life Christmas tree, about two feet in height, propped up in a small pan of water. It was decorated with a half dozen electric lights that were not illuminated, and the usual garish sweeps of tinsel and hanging ornaments.

"I see that Franklin C. has been in to try to cheer you up," Franklin B. noted with a smile.

"Eh?"

"The miniature tree, father. It's a lovely touch."

"Yes, yes. He's a good boy, that one." He coughed weakly, deep in his throat. "The damned tree's a blessed nuisance, just the same. Felt I should humor him, though. But no lights, I told him. Put my foot down there. Just can't tolerate those confounded lights —" He broke off into another fit of feeble coughing.

"Rest easy, father. Don't excite yourself. I just came up to introduce you to our guests."

"Guests?" The old man squinted into the obscure shadows behind his son. "Guests, you say? *Tonight*?"

"These are no ordinary guests, father. This is Lieutenant Cathy Carruthers, the celebrated detective, and her assistant, Sergeant Swanson."

"They are going to try to exorcise that accursed spirit?"

"Something like that."

The old man's laugh was a mirthless, guttural rattling deep in his

chest. "You are grasping at straws, my son. You must accept the reality of what is happening, what has now become inevitable. The ghost will come again, tonight, you mark my words." His voice fell to a rasping, portentous whisper. "You, as I, am a Vanderhille. There is no escape."

At that moment, a sudden wintry chill seemed to invade the room, and a ghostly, ethereal mist began to materialize in the gloom beyond the reach of the lamp.

"Do you see what I see?" Mark stood frozen in wide-eyed disbelief beside the lieutenant.

"Yes, Mark. But what is it?"

"It's the ghost, you poor fools," the old man croaked from his bed. "I can feel its bloodless presence."

Franklin B. had stumbled back toward the door, his face contorted with fear. "Get a cross," he choked. "*Someone get a cross!*"

The sinister mist seemed now to hover and vacillate, as though attempting to take on some kind of shape, then, slowly, it began to sink into the deeper shadows along the floor. Cathy Carruthers suddenly darted toward it, sweeping into it with outflung hands. Mark could see the mist swirl in around her, engulfing her, and he moved quickly. In three giant strides he was at her side; but then, suddenly, strangely, the ghostly presence, or whatever it was, had gone.

"My God, lieutenant!" Mark breathed incredulously, "what unholy horror are we dealing with here?"

The lieutenant chose not to respond. She walked back to the bed. "Do you want someone in here tonight?" she asked the old man, "someone to be with you?"

"No, It would serve no purpose."

"Very well, but if I am going to see this thing through, I must ask that you cooperate to some degree, at least." She turned to Mark. "Check the windows behind those drapes and make sure that they are securely bolted, and otherwise impregnable." To Franklin B., she said, "Is there any other access to this room, other than by the windows and this one door?"

"No, lieutenant. None whatever."

"Good. I intend to have the room thoroughly checked and searched, then a double guard will be posted outside the door for the entire night. I would like your assistance, Mr. Vanderhille, in seeing that your father submits to these precautions."

"Yes, of course. But how do you hope to protect *them*, lieutenant?"

"Them?"

"The guards," he said with eerie apprehension.

THE FOOTMAN'S NAME WAS ATHOLLE BROWN. HE WAS A short, pasty man, with a dumpy, ill-attired body that looked, even in uniform, to be all ass and pockets. The lieutenant and Mark caught up with him in the scullery, a steamy little hell-hole of dirty pots and pans, off the kitchen.

"Are you Atholle Brown?" the lieutenant asked.

The man looked up, startled. He had been lost to dreamy contemplation of the southern-most parts of a wiggly Misty and a jiggly Brenda, whose northern-most parts happened to be fortuitously poised over the scullery sink.

"I *thertainly* hope *tho*," Misty retorted with some emphasis, before Brown had a chance to respond. "I'd hate to think there *wath* more than one of *him* around."

"Ditto!" Brenda concurred with equal feeling.

Brown unfolded a smile that looked like a cob of corn after the birds had been at it. "Heh, heh," he chirped lamely, "couple of great kidders, these two." He levered himself up off a kitchen stool and turned to face the lieutenant.

"You got it right, lady. That's my name."

The lieutenant ignored the man's insolent manner. She consulted her watch. "I want all three of you people in the main lounge in, uh — twenty-seven minutes. That will be precisely ten o'clock. Is that clear?"

Both girls turned from the sink long enough to execute a quick curtsy. "Yes, mam," they said in unison.

"Brown?"

"Yeah, yeah — whatever you say, sweetheart."

Mark made a move at the lieutenant's side but she restrained him with a slight pressure on his arm. She had turned to leave then, and was already half way out the door, when Misty's sudden squeal of surprise and indignation made her spin around.

"You do that *onthe* more," Misty seethed as she approached the grinning footman, "and I'll cut you where it *hurtt* *moht*." She brandished a large kitchen knife from one soapy hand.

"What did he do?" the lieutenant asked from the doorway.

"He *goothed* me!" she wailed with righteous wrath.

"Just giving the girls a little treat, lady." Brown twisted his ugly

mouth into what was supposed to be a smile. "Nothing to concern you," he added.

"A *treat*?" Misty advanced threateningly, the knife at the ready. "Why you — you — you *Atholle*!"

The man's eyes flared with anger. He grabbed the knife out of the girl's hand and shoved her roughly back against the sink. "Nobody makes fun of my name," he snarled. But the words were scarcely out of his mouth when he felt the hand of the Amazon slip around his wrist and close over it like a velvet handcuff. She exerted a slow, vise-like pressure until the pallor of his face matched the sudden whitening of her knuckles. The knife clattered to the floor.

"I think I've heard about as much from you, Mr. Atholle Brown, as I care to hear." An unsmiling Amazon picked the man up by his pudgy neck with one hand, and perched him on the stool he had just vacated. It put them on more of an eye-to-eye level. "And I'm inclined to agree with Misty," she told him evenly. "that you are, indeed, sir, truly an Atholle."

"Damn you, stop *saying* that!" Tears of frustration had brimmed up in the man's eyes. He struggled violently to free himself, but when he found that impossible, he began to kick out blindly in all directions. A big black boot caught the Amazon squarely in the abdomen, and she jerked forward with a little grunt of pain and surprise.

Atholle Brown realized immediately that he had committed a foolish act. He looked, at that moment, like he would have given anything to relive the last few seconds of his life. But that was not to be. And he simply closed his eyes in a desperate attempt to shut out the visual horror, if not the pain, of the inevitable retribution he knew would shortly be wrought upon him.

In total darkness (as far as Atholle Brown was concerned), he felt himself being levitated across the scullery and, to the sounds of girlish giggles, immersed baptismally, butt first, up to his fifth lumbar vertebrae, into a sink full of pots, pans, and the random residue of Brenda's beef Wellington.

Atholle Brown suffered in steamy and silent martyrdom until he felt it was safe to open his eyes. When he did, he found himself to be alone. "That," he muttered bitterly to the flotsam and jetsam that bobbed about him in the greasy water, "has got to be one *Hell* of a price to pay for a Christmas goose."

OFFICERS FISK AND MAYHEW WERE COMPELLED TO MAKE

the search of Franklin A.'s sick room with the use of flashlights. The only light fixtures that worked were the yellow lamp beside the bed, and the lights on the miniature Christmas tree. All the other bulbs had either burnt out or been purposely screwed out. When Mayhew inadvertently switched on the tree lights, he was subjected to a barrage of verbal abuse from the vicinity of the bed that would have shamed a drunken sailor into signing up for lessons.

"You must admit," Fisk whispered to a grim and beleaguered Mayhew, "he swears with flawless diction."

But it was the windows that concerned the officers most. They both were fitted with conventional crescent hasps, which did appear to be more than adequate, but on the lieutenant's instructions, a steel wedge was tamped into each window between the sash and the jamb. The heating vents were small and grilled, and obviously no threat to anyone. There was nothing (and certainly no *one*) behind the heavy drapes or in the room's one and only closet. Fisk even checked under the bed.

"Trust you to look under there," Mayhew quipped; "isn't that the old maid's hope chest?"

"That does it, Mayhew." Fisk posted the latest score with a damp finger. "Want to try now for the See-You-Around trophy?"

But it was no more than twenty minutes later (the old grandfather clock had just chimed 10:45) and Fisk and Mayhew were at their post on the second floor landing outside Franklin A.'s door, when Fisk decided quite suddenly (without thought to what it might do to the already struggling Civil Rights movement, or the E.R.A.) to surrender her cold feminine shoulder to the warmth and security of Mayhew's masculine chest.

Mayhew, quite frankly, was glad of the company. For at that moment, some one, or some *thing*, had just dimmed the lights in the main central hall below, and the two officers had groped their way to the head of the stairs to investigate. They saw no one, nothing. Nothing, that is, but the long, empty staircase winding down into the abysmal, cavernous depths of the hall. *Then*, in that eerie, hollow gloom, came the unmistakable sound of footsteps, *thup, thup, thup*, slowly, but inevitably, ascending the wide carpeted staircase toward them. They gaped into the vacant shadows in horror, as apperception slowly dawned. The sound of the approaching footsteps was irrefutably real; but *whoever*, or *whatever*, was coming toward them, *was not*.

Fisk quickly sought the shelter of Mayhew's arms, and together,

with their eyes riveted on the empty stairs, they backed up to the door they had been assigned to guard. At this point, at least, it was still locked and secure.

"Who — who's there?" Mayhew called out in a shaky voice.

The footsteps halted immediately, poised, as it were, on the third from top stair. There was a kind of shuffling, as though the ghost was momentarily undecided on what to do next; then, with the same grim stealth they had come toward them, the footsteps began to recede. Slowly, they descended the stairs.

"Wheeeew!" Fisk breathed a long, tremulous sigh of relief. When the sound of the last *thup* had died away, she turned in Mayhew's arms and hung onto him. "I've never been so scared in my life," she said in a choked whisper. "Do you think that was the ghost?"

"It sure as hell wasn't Santa Claus," Mayhew told her with a shudder. "Maybe I ought to go and tell the lieutenant about it."

"And leave me here alone?"

"You go, then."

"By myself?"

"We can't *both* go," Mayhew said with exasperation. "This door can't be left unguarded."

"Why don't we, uh — try calling her?"

"Are you nuts —?"

They were spared any further anguish by a rapid rhythmic thumping that sounded to Fisk like the welcome approach of the cavalry. She half expected to hear the blare of a trumpet, but even without it, she managed to squirt out of Mayhew's arms and into a dignified posture, as a true and stalwart guardian of the law, before the lieutenant and Mark Swanson appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Did you two hear anything up here?" the lieutenant asked them breathlessly.

"Yes," Fisk said quickly, with sudden bravado. "It was the ghost, lieutenant. It came up to the top of the stairs and just stood there, watching us."

"You could see it?"

"No, but — it was there."

The lieutenant sighed circuitously. "What happened then?"

"We chased it back down," Fisk replied with a furtive look at Mayhew.

"You chased it back down," the lieutenant said dryly. "Just like that."

"Uh-huh."

Cathy Carruthers reached out an immaculately manicured finger and drew it across a lipstick smear on Mayhew's shirt front. "What do you make of this, Officer Fisk?"

"I, uh — I must have, uh — brushed up against him — in the dark," Fisk stammered through a flush of color. Then, "Damn it, Mayhew!" she added hotly, "why can't you look where you're going?"

Mayhew, Mark and Cathy Carruthers all looked at each other, and grinned.

"She oughta be in pictures," Mark crooned softly.

AFTER CHECKING THE SICK ROOM TO SEE THAT FRANKLIN A. was still in fine fettle (relatively speaking), the lieutenant and Mark left the two officers at their post outside the door, and returned to the main lounge. As they were entering the room, they encountered young Franklin C. in the doorway.

"Where have you been?" the lieutenant asked.

"I've been diddling in the dark," the boy replied. "Who snuffed the damn lights?"

"You went to the bathroom?"

"I thought I just said that."

The lieutenant regarded the boy closely. "I think I'd like to see your room, Franklin C., where you pursue all your many interests."

"Great," the young Vanderhille responded. "As a matter of fact, I'm rather involved right now in a somewhat, uh — burgeoning phenomenon."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

The boy grinned. "Girls," he said.

The lieutenant took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I had to ask," she told Mark in a weary aside. Then, for all to hear, "Make sure everyone stays together in the lounge while we're gone," she said, "and, Mark, take a head count every now and then. I don't want *anyone* wandering around this old house alone."

"You got it, lieutenant."

Mark stood in the doorway and watched his beautiful partner head up the stairs with the boy, past a somewhat humbled Fisk and Mayhew on the second floor landing, and on up and out of sight to the third story. He turned into the room then, to count heads.

Franklin B. and his wife, Candice, were enjoying a bottle of imported cognac by the fire; Misty, Brenda and a sullen Atholle Brown formed

a loose grouping around the tree. Mark walked over to the three servants.

"Everyone comfortable?"

"Comfortable," Brenda acknowledged in her gentle way, "but tired, sergeant, and a little anxious."

"That's understandable, under the circumstances," Mark said consolingly, "but it can't last much longer."

"And it won't," Atholle Brown chortled darkly, "at least for one of the Vanderhilles."

"Still feeling a bit surly, Brown?"

"If he *wathn't* complaining to you, *thergeant*," Misty put in, "he'd be at the telephone company again for *lihting hith* full name in the directory, *inth*ead of *juth*t the initial."

"That's a problem?"

"It *ith* when your name *ith* Atholle Brown, *thergeant*, and it *th* *thpelled* out in *reverthe*."

Mark laughed in spite of the evil eye he got from the dumpy footman. The man had changed clothes but he did not look any more presentable. "If your name is a source of such embarrassment to you," Mark told him, "why don't you change it?"

"Hey, that *th* great!" Misty clapped her hands enthusiastically. "Then he could *choothe thomething* to match that *nathty thtreak* up *hith* back, like, uh — Atholle Yellow."

Mark was about to point out that wasn't quite what he had in mind, when Brenda jumped into the fray, "— or the color of his cold, cold heart," she giggled, "like, Atholle Black."

The two girls seemed determined then, to wade gleefully, color by color, through the entire chromatic spectrum. Mark left them finally at the color Pink, to join the Vanderhilles.

THERE WAS A GRIM LOOK OF *DEJA VU* TO THE TWO SECOND-generation Vanderhilles; albeit, one by marriage. Mark approached them with compassion. He wondered how *he* would feel, given the one-to-four odds they had of surviving the next sixty minutes. The threat of the Christmas Eve ghost had taken on a new and eerie credibility since their arrival three hours ago, and there was little doubt in Mark's mind that something sinister was, indeed, afoot in the old house. *Something*, he sensed, *that was diabolically and obscenely evil*.

"One hour to go, sergeant," Franklin B. said with dark foreboding, as the chimes of the grandfather clock began to echo ominously

through the rambling old structure. "Whatever *is* going to happen, will, now, in this final hour." He glanced toward his wife who appeared to be well into her cups. "Are you bearing up, my dear?"

The woman turned slowly, training her great rhinarium conk on the two men. She peered down its imposing length for several tense moments, as though aiming a loaded bazooka, zeroing in. "*Que sera sera*," she said with a note of tearful inevitability, "what will be will be." She then proceeded to quietly sob, in a most refined, subdued, and thoroughly proper manner, as befitting a Vanderhille.

ON THE THIRD FLOOR, WHICH WAS ALMOST ENTIRELY GIVEN over to Franklin C. to do with as he chose, the lieutenant marveled at the hoarde of paraphernalia the boy had accumulated. Test tubes, beakers and burners; electronic gadgetry of every description; computer systems, feed-ins and read-outs; and wall upon wall of books that appeared to cover every conceivable advance in modern technology.

"This is very impressive," the lieutenant told the boy, "but where do you sleep?"

Franklin C. opened the door to a small room (at least, by comparison) that contained the usual trappings of a bed chamber. The room was clean and neat, the bed made, and the porcelain in the ensuite bathroom virtually gleaming.

"You're a very tidy person," the lieutenant noted absently.

"Not really," the boy replied. "The girls keep it clean for me."

"Both of them? I understood that Brenda did the cooking."

"She does, but they like to help each other with their separate duties. Besides," and he gave the lieutenant a secret smile, "I find them both to be willing and authentic sources of, uh — material, with which to research my current project —"

"Spare me the sordid details," the lieutenant told him curtly. "You are, you know, quite abominable." She hustled him toward the door. "It's time, I think, that we rejoined the others."

As they went over the threshold, and headed for the stairs, Franklin C. said, somewhat magnanimously, "Really, lieutenant, it wouldn't be very sporting of me to play favorites, now would it?"

AT PRECISELY 11:20 WHEN EVERYONE, EXCEPT THE BED-ridden Franklin A., Fisk and Mayhew, was assembled in the lounge, Misty informed the lieutenant that it was customary at this hour for

her to administer medication to the ailing Vanderhille.

"And what," the lieutenant inquired, "is the nature of this 'medication?' "

"I don't know, lieutenant. Either the *thir* or the madam *giveth* me the tray to take up to him."

"That is correct, lieutenant." Franklin B. came forward then. "It is simply a pain killer, you see, and a sedative, prescribed by Dr. Quarrels. Quarrels has been our physician for over thirty years. I keep the medication locked in a cabinet in my study."

"This is a usual, nightly procedure then?"

"Quite."

"But why, might I ask, do you or Mrs. Vanderhille not administer the medication yourselves?"

Franklin B. sighed heavily. "My father can be somewhat cantankerous, lieutenant, as you have seen, and particularly with myself and my wife. On the other hand, he does like the girls. And they never fail to get him to — to acquiesce without a fuss."

The lieutenant dislodged a fall of golden hair from her forehead with a toss of her beautiful head. "Very well," she said. "Mark will go with you to the study, and from there, he'll accompany Misty, along with the medication, to the sick room."

"As you wish."

The lieutenant remained in the doorway where she could watch Franklin B., Mark and Misty traverse the wide hall to the study, and where, at the same time, she could still keep an eye on the others in the lounge, Candice Vanderhille, Franklin C., Brenda and Atholle Brown. She could even follow Mark and Misty up the stairs, until they disappeared from view on the second floor landing. The entire mission consumed no more than fifteen minutes; with Franklin B. returning first, Mark and Misty shortly after.

"Everything copacetic?" the lieutenant asked Mark on his return.

"Sure." Mark smiled thinly. "The old man is alive, if not too well. And, as you suggested, I told Fisk and Mayhew to stay in sight at the top of the stairs. From there, they can effectively monitor the door to the sick room (which, by the way, I checked out, and left locked), and they can keep us in view at the same time."

"Great." She turned to the six people who were now assembled in the lounge. "I want you all in one group by the fire," she told them. "There are only some twenty-three minutes remaining until the crucial hour of midnight, and until that clock has struck twelve times, I want

no one to move from where I can see them. Do I make myself clear?"

They all nodded numbly as they gathered together in a loose group by the fire. Franklin B. and his wife sat aloofly to one side; the two girls flanked their *enfant gate*, Franklin C., on the chesterfield; and Atholle Brown sat glumly alone.

"There is a visual link now," the lieutenant said quietly to Mark, "between all eleven people in the house. All, that is, except Franklin A. And he is secure in a room that is barred and locked, and guarded by two police officers. If that so-called ghost approaches anyone in this house from now until midnight, I intend to know about it."

"What if it goes after the old man?" Mark asked clearly puzzled. "He's all alone up there."

"Fisk and Mayhew will see anyone who tries to enter that room, Mark. There is no other access."

"Lieutenant." Mark turned to whisper so that only she could hear. "We're not talking about a flesh-and-blood killer," he said with some frustration, "we're talking about a *ghost*."

"Yes," the lieutenant said with maddening ambiguity, "and a very enterprising ghost, at that."

"Meaning?"

"Think about it, Mark. The Christmas Eve ghost writes poetry, types threats, has the icy chill of the grave, and walks the stairs like an unseen phantom, it haunts us as an ethereal apparition, then disappears without a trace —"

"It's damned demonic," Mark breathed. "What will the bloody thing do next?"

"I suspect," the lieutenant said quietly, "*it will attempt to carry out its morbid threat.*"

THE MINUTES DRAGGED ON. THERE WAS A MOUNTING TENSION in the assembled group that even the brilliant tree or the blazing warmth of the fire could not dispel. What little conversation there had been between them had dissolved into guarded, silent glances of apprehension and fear. The lieutenant and Mark stood apart, near the open door to the hall, each with one eye on Fisk and Mayhew at the top of the stairs, the other on the group by the fire.

"This waiting is murder," Mark muttered to the lieutenant. He looked at his watch. "Fifteen minutes to go."

As he spoke, the clock chimed the quarter hour, and the boy, Franklin C., got casually to his feet. He sauntered slowly over to where

the lieutenant and Mark were standing at the door.

"I asked you, Franklin," the lieutenant told him curtly, "to stay with the group."

"Just wanted to stretch my legs," the boy replied. "Besides, what you *said* was not to leave your sight, or words to that effect."

"Whatever." The lieutenant's impatience was evident in her voice. "Now, do as I have requested."

"You're the boss, beautiful." The boy turned, as though to rejoin the group, but he sidled lightly past the two detectives and stepped over the threshold into the hall. He just stood there then, looking up the stairs, smiling, one finger pressed thoughtfully to his lips, the other hand buried in the right pocket of his jacket. "You appear to have things well in hand, lieutenant," he said disarmingly.

The lieutenant suddenly jerked erect with a quick, Amazonian toss of her long golden mane. Her eyes flashed like blue lightning. And she moved with the speed of sound, sweeping the boy up off his feet with one encircling arm, and jerking his right hand free of the pocket. A small plastic box, about three inches by two, by an inch and a half thick, fell from his fingers.

"Mark, hang onto this little monster."

The Amazon put her words into action, and Franklin C. went hurtling through the air into Mark's massive arms. She then swung on her heel, hiking up her snug gray skirt as she turned, and she streaked for the stairs. She took them three at a time, a magnificent leggy blur, sky-rocketing upward, her fluorescent yellow hair strung out behind like Halley's Comet. Fisk and Mayhew staggered back as she flew past them, then stood in stunned immobility as she leapt clear of the landing and leveled her fantastic body, feet first, at the door to Franklin A.'s room.

She seemed to just hang there for a moment, as though in suspended levitation, a beautiful battering ram of exquisite proportions, caught and held in midflight by the flash of a camera. Then came the violent, wood-rendering *Crash!*, as the door buckled and splintered in all directions — and there, in the midst of mayhem, the Amazon flipped lightly to her feet with the willowy effortlessness of a falling feline.

She hesitated for only an instant, turned, sucked in a lung full of air, and disappeared into the room. Seconds later, she re-emerged, flushed and disheveled, with a struggling, gasping (but very much alive) Franklin A. Vanderhille wrapped in her arms.

"Do not go near that room," she cautioned a slackjawed Fisk and a

wide-eyed, ogling Mayhew. "And, Fisk," she said with a disparaging look at Mayhew, "pull down my skirt for me, will you please? My arms are full, and I wouldn't want Mayhew's eyes to end up on the carpet."

THE CLOCK STRUCK ONE. IT WAS CHRISTMAS DAY.

Franklin A. was now comfortably ensconced on the chesterfield in front of the fire. All eyes in the room were on him as he complained vociferously to a sleepy-eyed Dr. Quarrels. The good doctor had been summoned from a warm bed (and a warm body) to attend to his elderly patient, and he was now waiting *im*patiently for a well-placed shot in the butt to take effect and "shut the old bugger up," as he so aptly put it.

Franklin B., meanwhile, and his supercilious spouse were off to one side, as was their custom, quietly polishing off the remainder of the brandy, with somewhat mixed emotions. Tears, brought on first by fear, then by shock and contrition, along with the pervasive warmth of the brandy, had reddened the woman's flaming great honker to where it had begun to look like part of the Christmas decor.

Franklin C. had already departed, under escort to Fisk and Mayhew. He had been handcuffed to the comely, brown-eyed policewoman, and, as they went out the door (undaunted to the very end), the lascivious little leach was making a last minute pass at his flushed and embarrassed captor.

The servants were huddled by the tree, Atholle Brown on one side by himself (as was his fate), the two girls whispering secretly between themselves, too excited by the turn of events to think yet of retiring. "Imagine," Misty was saying, "that *nahty* little Frankie, *th*caring the *panth* off *uth* like that."

Brenda gave her friend an indignant little nudge. "I wish you wouldn't put it quite that way," she tittered.

"Anyway," Misty sulked, "*thi*h *plat*he *ith* the *pit*h. The entertainment *ith* *juth*t too young or too old."

"You mean *was*," Brenda sighed; "now it's just *too damn old*."

The lieutenant and Mark, who had innocently overheard the conversation, grinned at one another as they tactfully moved out of earshot. "Let's take a look at that room now, Mark."

"The sick room?"

"Yes, the air should be clear by this time."

As they climbed the wide staircase, Mark asked, "What suddenly twigged you to the idea that young Franklin C. was up to no good,

lieutenant?"

She treated him to one of her special smiles. "I could say it was woman's intuition," she said coyly, "and I guess, in a sense, it was. But, still, there had to be some logical explanation for all the weird things that were happening —"

"You don't believe in ghosts?"

"That's not the issue, Mark, *If*, in fact, it was the work of a ghost, then *whatever* we did would have been totally futile. I simply *had* to proceed on the premise that *someone*, or *something*, was the root cause of the mischief. And that, of course, made Franklin C. the most logical suspect."

"Why him? He's only a kid."

"But a bright kid, Mark, with all the expertise. It's been said, you know, that there is a fine line between genius and madness. I was becoming more and more convinced that our young prodigy had already made that awesome transition."

"But, my God, lieutenant, to murder his little twin sister, then his grandmother — and to make a bloody game of it? What motive could he have possibly had?"

"There is no motive in madness, Mark, but madness itself. As you mentioned a moment ago, the boy was simply playing a game."

They had reached the broken doorway and the lieutenant entered the room with caution, sniffing audibly as she crossed the threshold. She went directly to an overhead light fixture that hung from the center of the ceiling. It had a large, Tiffany-style shade. With the assistance of a chair, she retrieved a small plastic box that had been secreted in the flanged top of the Tiffany. It was somewhat larger than the box that had fallen from Franklin C.'s hand, when the lieutenant had jumped him in the hall.

"How did you know that was up there?"

"I didn't. It just seemed obvious." She held the small box in her hand and pried open the lid with a metal nail file. A swirl of milky ether curled over the lip of the box and began to sink in a writhing, ghostly fashion toward the floor.

"There's your ghost," she said, "dry ice. The gas it gives off is heavier than air and will slowly sink to the floor. It will take several seconds to dissipate. And a closer examination of this box, Mark, will show that the lid can be operated electronically, by remote control. Needless to say, it was triggered for a few seconds while we were in here before — hence the illusion."

"I'll be damned."

The lieutenant moved over to the bed, poking at the bed covers, the pillows, the mattress.

"What are you looking for now?"

"I don't know, but I will when I find it."

Mark sighed heavily. "Well, while you're looking, how about filling me in on how that typewriter was being operated without anyone being in the room?"

"But it wasn't, of course. I've been doing some snooping in the past hour, Mark, and the sound of that typewriter had simply been recorded earlier, then played back from a tape hidden in the room. More electronics. Actually, it was behind the grill-work of the heat register. It was the boy, you will recall, who drew his father's attention to the sound to begin with, then, feigning fear, he prevented him from entering until the tape had shut itself off. The boy was no poet, though. That poem was pretty childish."

"What about the icy chill in the room?"

"Dry ice again, hidden in the heat vent with the tapedeck. We felt something of a chill, too, up here. Remember?"

"Do I ever."

The lieutenant had wandered from the bed to the yellow bedside lamp and the miniature Christmas tree.

"Okay," Mark said after some reflection, "what about those footsteps, going up and down the stairs, scaring Fisk and Mayhew witless? That couldn't have been a recording. We heard it, too. All the way downstairs, from where we were standing at the door to the lounge."

"Underneath those stairs, Mark, is an open storage and utility area, fuse panels, etc., and an unfinished washroom for the express use of the servants. Franklin C. was in that washroom at the time the footsteps were heard. He was also the only one to wander away from the group. The way I see it, he simply dimmed the lights at the fuse panel, then with the aid of an ordinary house mop, he created the illusion of footsteps from the *under*-side of the carpeted stairs. As a matter of fact, we met the little ghoul as he was returning to the lounge."

"Yeah. We did, didn't we?"

"Ouch!"

The lieutenant gave a sudden cry of pain and stuck one red-tipped finger into her mouth. "That's rather strange," she said.

"What's strange?"

"All the lights on this tree, Mark, are of the cool burning variety, except this one." She pointed to a blue bulb at the base and the back of the tree. "And look at *this*." There was a blob of waxy substance still clinging to the bulb. "Ah," she said softly, "I see now how he did it."

"How who did what?"

"How Franklin C. had planned to kill his grandfather." She sniffed at the liquid in the container in which the tree was standing. "Yes, there's still a faint odor of bitter almonds," she said as though to herself. "That's prussic acid, all right. And I strongly suspect that a small tablet of cyanide-salt crystals was stuck to the back of this bulb, with wax, or gelatin — whatever."

"I don't get it."

"After Franklin A. had been sedated, Mark, his loving grandson must have triggered the switch (electronically) to turn on these lights. The heat from the hot bulb would then have melted the wax, and the lethal tablet had simply dropped into the prussic acid. *Voila!* — cyanide gas! Can you believe it?"

"A bloody execution," Mark muttered. "But why would he draw attention to himself, lieutenant, by going out into the hall like that? That's what tipped you off, wasn't it?"

"Yes. And my guess is, that his remote only had a limited range. He had to be in the hall in order to make it work. There's no doubt about it, Mark. That kid was truly ingenious."

"Yeah, I guess." Mark gave it some thought for a moment or two. "But he was too damn smart for his own good, lieutenant. If he'd stuck to holding pillows over little girl's heads, and shoving old ladies down flights of stairs, he might even have gotten away with it. Sometimes," Mark added sagely, "it doesn't pay to get too cute."

"Oh yeah?" Cathy Carruthers smiled slyly. "I happen to think you're pretty cute yourself."

Mark, always the opportunist, dug frantically into his pocket. "Damn!" he said. "I must have left it in the car." He fixed her with a pleading little smile. "Any chance for a Christmas smooch without the mistletoe?"

She closed the distance between them. "Well — maybe," she teased, "maybe just the *ghost* of a chance. After all, as Misty would say, it *is* *Chrithmath*."

"Yeah," Mark murmured against her lips, "and *bethideth*, who *believeth* in *ghothth*?"

There was a security leak someplace, but if anyone could solve the mystery it was Ransom — or could he?

The Piggyback Slurp Affair

by MIKE TAYLOR

WHEN HOBART BAYNE CALLED ME FROM HIS THIRTY-TWO foot cruiser *Clarissa* somewhere out in the Gulf, I was halfway through a long lunch of oysters and Carta Blanca at the Drifter's Reef just outside Galveston.

I picked up the phone at the end of the bar. Ship-to-shore static crackled briefly, then gave way to the familiar cigarette-bass voice.

"Ransom? Is that you, son? You had to file for bankruptcy yet?"

I sighed audibly. "Hello, you old cow thief. No, my creditors are organizing a lynch mob, but I'm still one jump ahead of them. I wear a lot of disguises."

It was ritual patter. Hobie Bayne had been after me for years to take over his security operation at AeroTech. It's one of the bigger research and development outfits for aircraft related components in the country. The money was more than I could spend, but I liked the independence of a one-man office — being able to pick and choose my jobs and take a day off to go fishing if I felt like it. He made no secret of hoping I folded, so I'd have to come back to work for him.

"Your answering service said I'd find you there," he boomed. "Tough life you private consultants lead."

"Almost as bad as a business tycoon's," I said. "Look, my beer's getting warm. What can I do for you?"

"Son, I got troubles, of the big variety. What's chances of you and me getting together later this afternoon?"

"Sure. I'm between cases right now. I'll warn you: my rates have gone up since last time."

He laughed. "If you can pull my fat out of the fire on this one, you can name your bonus. I'm on my way back in now. What say we meet at the plant and I'll explain the problem — five o'clock okay?"

I said it was. We traded a few more cheerful insults, then I hung up and went back to my oysters. Slimy little devils but I love 'em.

HOBIE BAYNE'S FIVE-ACRE RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT plant was located in a large industrial park between Houston and Baytown. While Rockwell and Northrup and Boeing, etc., are busy snagging defense contracts and designing the aircraft of the future, AeroTech works down at the nuts and bolts level, developing the sophisticated components that make up the endless variety of complex servo-systems. It's a profitable if risky business — and a cutthroat one, with dozens of competitors in the market.

I rolled up to the plant's executive entrance at a quarter to five. The big brown-and-gold Lincoln was already there. The door guard checked my license and grudgingly let me inside. A suite of offices just beyond housed the production managers and admin staff; the rest of the building was taken up by labs and simulators. From somewhere in the rear came the vibrating hum of heavy machinery.

Hobie Bayne, florid-faced and sweating under his \$150 Stetson, greeted me with a crushing handshake and pulled me into a large conference room. The twenty-foot table, vacant now, was stacked high with computer printouts.

Hobie's a big bear of a man, loud and sometimes crude, almost a caricature of the wheeler-dealer Texas millionaire. You have to get underneath that rough exterior to find the vital parts, such as fierce loyalty and an unyielding honesty in dealing with people. Having had him as a father-in-law for a spell, I was familiar with most of the good and bad points of this cattle baron turned industrialist.

"Tell me I'm a sight for sore eyes," I said, "and I'll belt you."

He grinned. "From the looks of those scabs and bruises, your last job must have been a humdinger. Lone-wolfing has its drawbacks, I'd say."

I shrugged. "We're here to talk about *your* problems, not mine."

He looked hurt briefly, then pushed it aside. "Okay, let's get down to brass tacks. Here's the situation. Over the past three months I've lost eight R&D contracts to the competition. Not in the bidding wars, but new concepts and proposals we had on the boards and somebody else pulled out of the hat first, claiming exclusive rights."

"You've got a leak," I said.

"Tell me about it. Some slimy so-and-so is selling me out, lock, stock, and banana stand, and it's costing AeroTech big bucks. Who? I don't know. But how? How's he doing it? That's what's got me stumped."

He milked a dramatic pause. I waited.

"Every one of those eight designs came from a different development area. You know how I compartmentalize this operation. The people who work on a project for the tail assembly aren't aware of what other research is under way up front, or if their work impacts it. Crimps the hell out of job satisfaction, but it's necessary to keep things under wraps. So now I'm losing stuff across the board — which seems to rule out a single leak."

"There must be someone in charge of the overall operation, like your production supervisor?"

"Two men know as much as I do. Les Caruthers and Jay Kelly. I'd trust either one of them with my life. They've been with me since the fifties. I pay them mighty well."

"Still, they're possibilities. Everyone is. No pattern at all to the ripoffs?"

"Not that I can see. Our designs were released by five different companies, none of them turning out more than two. No particular timing or sequence, except that every time it happened just as soon as our work was finished."

"Have you talked to the companies?"

"Yeah, at least to those where I know somebody." He shook his head. "It's a rough business, son, and there aren't many rules to play by. Hell, I've used some borrowed information at AeroTech when it came my way. They all told me to go fly my kite in a strong wind near the power lines."

"How much is this costing you?"

"Too damn much. Not just in money but reputation. The stock's starting to slide. Enough for me to offer you twenty-five grand if you can plug the leak."

I whistled. "That's big money to us Yankees. Okay, tell you what. I'll need a complete rundown on the plant layout and operation, how the R&D process is handled from start to finish. Also, complete personnel files on everybody here. Including your top men. Right now we treat everyone as a suspect. Leo Wyman still your chief of security? Set up a meeting with him tomorrow. That'll get me off the ground."

He nodded and mopped at his face with a huge red handkerchief. "I'll have an office ready for you to use in the morning. You need anything, interviews, production data, whatever, just ask. I feel better already."

"Let's not start celebrating yet," I said. "These inside jobs are tough to crack. Your twenty-five grand won't guarantee any results, just my undivided attention for awhile."

IT TOOK ME THREE DAYS TO COME UP WITH A LIST OF CANDIDATES. Three hard, mind-dulling, patience-wearing, enemy-making days. And a good portion of the nights. Nobody likes to be looked at too hard, even if they're clean, because such scrutiny implies that they're at least capable of disloyalty. I had to admit though that Hobie's two main men seemed to be above suspicion.

Leo Wyman could have been a big help since he was up on security matters and familiar with most of the two hundred personnel employed at the plant. Unfortunately he acted angry and embarrassed at having an outsider brought in over his head. I had to pry and bully every piece of information that I needed out of him. He was a harried, bitter little man, no doubt made so by constant interference in other people's lives. I wondered if I was looking at a portrait of myself, twenty years down the road.

It was also necessary to include the thirty or so people in the main offices downtown. They handled all the final specifications and marketing arrangements once plant development was completed on a project. The two locations were linked together through a computer hookup which allowed them continuous status updates and data retrieval.

ONE FALLOUT BENEFIT FROM THIS EXTRA WORKLOAD WAS that I made the acquaintance (as my granny used to say) of one of the systems analysts responsible for company software, a striking Spanish-American lady named Juanita Graham. Serious negotiations finally led to dinner on the third evening, a small celebration marking the completion of my initial list. Over excellent plates of Mexican food at

Ramon's, a tiny hideaway out on Beaumont Road, I tried some of the names on her. I'd decided to publicize my presence, talk to anyone who would listen, in hopes of stirring the pot.

"The top spots are held by those folks who were let go over the past two years. Lawrence Ritenour from the main offices, Joseph Bitalli and Harold Freeman from the plant. Know any of 'em?"

She crunched a nacho and peered at me from under a mass of foamy black hair. "I went out once with Larry Ritenour. He's sort of shy, but a brain. One of those types who eats, drinks, and sleeps computers. He wrote and maintained all of our system modifications. I think he left because they caught him using company equipment and time to develop his own software."

"Yeah, that's what his file says. The other two?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Both left last summer. Bitalli took a job in Southern California. Freeman just resigned, no reason given. That's a little odd. The other two I came up with are still on board at the plant. Charles Lutz and Waymon Harkness. Both have interesting files, chock full of letters of reprimand and various disciplinary problems."

"I've talked to Mr. Harkness frequently on the remote, a few times in person. He's involved in quality control. He seemed pleasant enough, although I sometimes felt like he was undressing me with his eyes. I never dealt with the other man." She shook her head. "I've heard company rumors. I'm not going to repeat them. I do know they both have, shall I say, high visibility with management."

"Say any one of these five had a motive. Where's the weak link? Which one had the best opportunity to sell out AeroTech?"

"Maybe I'm being provincial," Juanita said, "but to me the easiest access to anything is through the computer. Somebody could be duping tapes and smuggling them out."

"Easier said than done. Security in the library is pretty tight and everybody leaving the plant walks through a scan that would erase any kind of magnetic recording. Of course if it is an inside job, that narrows the field a little. And if it's not, then we get into the area of bugs, long-range listening devices, maybe an inside-outside connection . . . trouble is, the leak doesn't have to fit the profile of any of these five. It could be anyone else, with some obscure reason nobody suspects."

She smiled sympathetically. "Where will you start?"

"I guess I'll arrange to spend some more of Hobie Bayne's money," I said sourly.

AN INVERSION LAYER HAD SETTLED OVER THE CITY, AND OUR first big heat wave of the year started in earnest. It was hot, it was even more humid, and by the second day there was eye-stinging smog. Gets a little more like L.A. every year.

After I made certain Joe Bitalli was still in California I crossed him off the list. Complete background checks for the other four were started by the extra men I hired. Ritenour and Freeman were still in the Houston area. The former now worked for a savings and loan and apparently led a rather monastic existence. Freeman was still unemployed and seemed to have fallen into the bottle rather badly. Lutz checked out as a quiet family man, in spite of his troubles on the job. Harkness, however, kept up a life-style that caught my interest. He drove a late-model Toronado, leased a penthouse condo in one of the ritzy new complexes, entertained a lot, and was out on the town four or five nights a week, where he spent heavily. It's a common pattern for someone who's just come into some dough. Maybe he'd won the Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes, but I doubted it.

I asked the ever-cheerful Leo Wyman about him and for once he showed some interest. "Could be. Could be your boy. Head of QC knows just about everything that goes on around here. He's always acted snotty when I ran routine checks."

"He associate with any of these guys that you know of?" I read off the other names on my list.

"No-o-o, don't think so. 'Course, Larry Ritenour was from HQ; nobody down here has much to do with them. That all you've got?"

I said it was. He looked secretly pleased.

Hobie didn't groan much about the eight men I hired on for the background work, but he wasn't too thrilled with my next idea.

"Son, you're talking up to half a million bucks! I can't turn loose of the specs for another component with this guy hanging around ready to pounce on it. I'm pushing bankruptcy right now."

"Spare me," I said. "You're about as close to hard times as OPEC. Look, your leak has gone dormant now; we've got to roust him out. Unless I stumble onto something out of bounds, he's safe. That list of possibles I came up with is based on available information. There's a fifty-fifty chance this guy is being driven by something that doesn't show up in a file, something his friends and coworkers don't even know about. We need to get him off dead center."

"But he knows we're after him. Will he take the chance?"

"He's done this eight times before. He's bound to feel confident

about his system. Sure he knows about the investigation, but that's just icing on the cake. Not only is he ripping you off — nobody can catch him. I think he'll go ahead."

"What about planting a dummy?" he said resignedly.

"No. This could be anybody. There's no way you could set it up without bringing in some of your people. If we tip him, he'll just lay low and laugh at us."

"Okay, okay. As a matter of fact we've got a little item for vertical stabilization scheduled to complete testing next week. I was planning to hold up on it. Guess I won't."

"Good," I said. "That gives me time to establish some patterns on my prime candidates and scout out a few other possibilities. I'll need another voucher."

He shrugged. "Whatever it takes. Say, by the way, Eve's back home for a couple of days . . ."

"And?"

"You might think about stopping by sometime. Say for supper the first part of next week?"

"Hobie . . ." I sighed. "All right. But it's water under the bridge. You're wasting your time."

"Just come on by. She'll be glad to see you."

I'll bet, I thought glumly.

THAT WEEKEND I TOOK JUANITA TO WATCH THE ASTROS give one away to the Dodgers. We chomped overpriced hot dogs and drank warm beer and laughed a lot. On the way home she mentioned that Larry Ritenour had called her.

I did my Groucho imitation with my eyebrows.

"He asked me out to dinner next week. He sounded — I don't know — different somehow. More confident. I was going to turn him down, then I thought you might be interested. I said I'd call him back."

"Good idea. If you don't mind too much, how about taking him up on it. The sooner the better. It's a long shot but any piece of information we can get might help."

"I don't mind. He's not a masher or anything. What should I look for?"

"Just general things. Try to draw him out on how he feels about AeroTech, what he's been doing, and so on. Don't press him."

She grinned. "Wow! Just like Charlie's Angels."

Three days later she was in Rice University Hospital, more dead than alive.

I HEARD ABOUT IT ON THE RADIO TUESDAY MORNING AND spilled my coffee. A motorist had found her in a ditch north of Memorial Park a little after midnight. Her disabled car was a quarter of a mile up the road. Hit and run, the police said.

Like hell.

I ran into the living room and punched on my answering machine. There were three calls from Juanita between ten and eleven last night — all urgent requests for me to contact her. I swore virulently. I'd been out at Hobie's futile reunion dinner and, full of bourbon and branch, had neglected to check for calls when I came in. Not that it would have made any difference, since it was nearly one o'clock by then.

I found Larry Ritenour at the Great Western Savings & Loan office on Liberty Road. He shared a tiny cubicle with a minicomputer and a Xerox machine. He was a tall, slender kid, sallow-faced, nervous brown eyes behind thick glasses. He acted more scared than angry when I twisted his shirt front and slammed him back into his chair.

"Juanita Graham!"

"Y-yeah?"

"You had dinner with her last night."

"Yeah. How —?"

"Tell me about it. Quick."

His lip began to quiver. "We had dinner, that's all. A couple of drinks. At the El Ranchero. What happened? What's wrong?"

"She's close to dead," I said harshly, "that's what's wrong. When did you leave her?"

"Dead?" he repeated dully. "She can't be. She can't be. I just saw her."

"C'mon. Stop babbling. What happened last night?"

"Nothing. I took her home around eleven. My roommates even ribbed me about getting back so early. I share an apartment with two other guys. We BS'd for awhile and then I went to bed."

Very neat alibi. I felt a measure of common sense returning. I'd nearly gotten a girl killed, now I was about to put the whole investigation in jeopardy.

"Okay. Sorry I was so rough on you. Juanita was a good friend. My advice is for you to call the police, tell them what you know about last

night. It might help them and it'll save you some trouble."

"How — how did she get hurt?" He was a lousy actor.

"Some idiot ran her down," I said grimly, playing the game to the hilt. "Hit and run, I guess."

SHE LOOKED VERY SMALL IN A WORLD OF WHITE. THE LUSTROUS black hair had been shaved off and her head was swathed in bandages. There were tubes everywhere. Various pieces of life-support apparatus that were clustered around her bed hummed or pumped efficiently.

"How bad is it?" I asked the young doctor from the trauma center who'd finally allowed me into I.C.U.

He shook his head. "About as bad as you can get and still be here instead of at the morgue. She's got a cranial fracture, shattered pelvis, two broken legs, assorted internal injuries, including a ruptured spleen which we removed . . ."

"Are you telling me she's clinically dead?"

"No . . . she's young and in excellent health. These first twenty-four hours are critical. If she survives them, it's possible she could pull through."

"What are the chances?"

He shrugged. "One in four that she'll survive. Less for a complete recovery. I'll know more tomorrow."

"I'd like to see her personal effects."

He blinked at me, probably wondering what kind of ghoul he was dealing with. "The police have them. It's standard procedure here for hit-and-runs."

"Thanks for letting me in, Doc. You keep her alive, hear?"

He smiled bleakly. "I'll do my best."

LIEUTENANT DALE ALVAREZ WAS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE from Homicide; we held each other in grudging mutual respect. After leaving the hospital I'd driven down to police headquarters and now we were closeted in his glass-walled office.

"Traffic brought over a copy of the report this morning," he said. He was short, olive-skinned, with a magnificent black mustache. "Best they can tell, it happened right around midnight. You say this one may be more than a routine hit-and-run?"

"Yeah," I said. "It was attempted murder. Anything on the car or driver?"

"Nothing. You got any proof of this?"

"Not yet. That's why I'm here talking to you." Briefly I outlined what was going on at AeroTech. "You'll be hearing from her dinner date, I expect, a guy named Larry Ritenour. He's one of my suspects. You can check him out but he's alibied — he didn't try to kill her, not directly." I rubbed my eyes. "I'm responsible for this mess. I used her to do some of my digging — I didn't figure it was going to get this rough."

"You say this Ritenour was probably involved. Why don't I pull him, sweat him a little?"

"No use. He's an accessory at best. And until I crack this thing at AeroTech there's no motive. I need two days, lieutenant. If things work out I can hand you a would-be murderer and an accessory, not to mention a big-time rip-off operation."

He stared at me. "I hope you can deliver. If I sit on this egg and nothing hatches I'll look pretty bad. But I won't be alone, will I? What's your angle?"

"Juanita Graham stumbled onto something last night. She tried to call me three times. Unfortunately, she must also have tipped Ritenour. He and whoever he's working with set up an 'accident' then arranged for his alibi. Whatever she was going to tell me . . . could we take a look at her personal effects?"

"Sure. Why not?"

In spite of the heat wave outside, the basement was as gloomy and cold as autumn in Pittsburgh. A young attendant got Juanita's clothing and purse out of a drawer labeled "Graham, J., H&R," and laid them out on a table for us. Her torn and dirty clothes revealed nothing. Alvarez dumped the purse and we poked slowly through its contents.

It was the typical clutter: lipsticks and a make-up kit, a packet of Kleenex, three pens, assorted ticket stubs, a wallet with the usual ID and credit cards, a box of throat lozenges, two tampons, some loose change, a crumpled sales slip from a downtown discount store — I straightened out the slip and there it was. On the back two words had been hastily scribbled.

Piggyback Slurp.

I showed it to Alvarez. "We're in business."

THE STABILIZER COMPONENT WAS SCHEDULED FOR FINAL simulator testing and certification on Thursday. Wednesday night I called Hobie Bayne and explained exactly what I wanted done the next

day. Everything had to appear normal, the routine for completing a project would have to be followed to the letter.

"Son, I don't think they'll bite. Not after you jumped young Ritenour that way."

"I know. A stupid mistake. It could go either way. With all the turmoil they could decide to sit this one out. Or they might figure they've accomplished their objectives: shut up Juanita, fooled the police, and left me in the dark. Ritenour gave the cops a statement and they let him go without any questions. I was humbly apologetic when he told me his alibi. They might feel they're in the clear. And it's a lot of money to pass up."

"Okie-dokie. We'll give 'er a go. Sorry to hear about the young lady."

A hospital bulletin had announced Juanita Graham's death at ninety-three Wednesday morning. Cause: trauma resulting from massive internal injuries. The local news media reported it tersely throughout the day, followed by the usual sanctimonious editorials against drunk drivers.

THURSDAY MORNING LARRY RITENOUR DIDN'T GO IN TO work. I knew because I'd been sitting outside his apartment building in a rented Buick since five A.M. One of my overhires had the back entrance covered. The morning crawled away on centipede feet while I listened to my stomach growl and wished I'd had the foresight to pick up a Danish and coffee. At 10:35 he came down the steps, wearing green coveralls and carrying a windbreaker. Odd. The temperature was already 85 degrees, chasing the humidity. He got into his car, a tan Mustang, and tooled away. I wasn't far behind.

His first stop was at what looked like an abandoned garage down amidst the boarding houses and cheap hotels in the older part of town. The Mustang went in and he came out driving a gray-green van with telephone company markings.

We went across town and out 225. Toward the AeroTech plant. Beyond Pasadena he pulled into a small shopping mall and circled around behind the block of stores. I left the car in the main parking lot and followed on foot. If this was a dodge I was going to feel pretty stupid.

I rounded the corner at the far end of a K-Mart. The van was parked near a loading dock. Ritenour was lifting up one of those big steel grills countersunk in the blacktop that provide access to underground

utilities. When it was open he got out a shiny metal case and an extension ladder from the back of the van.

I sprinted back to the nearest pay phone and called Homicide. Dale Alvarez was in.

"Payoff time," I said. "Meet me at the Tumbleweed Mall out on 225 as quick as you can. No lights or noise. I'll be behind the stores."

"On my way."

WHEN I GOT BACK TO MY CORNER RITENOUR WAS GONE. A foot of ladder protruded from the hole. I went carefully over to it and peered down. No sign of him. About eight feet below a narrow corridor full of plastic pipes and insulated cables and huge, snaky masses of wires ran parallel to the buildings in either direction. It was a service area for the various types of utility lines.

Ten minutes later an unmarked LTD pulled up and Alvarez jumped out. He looked at the hole, at me, and back at the hole. I nodded.

Ever try going down a metal ladder quietly? The aluminum contraption scraped and squeaked and shimmied. I hoped the traffic noise overhead would drown out most of the racket. When I reached the bottom I looked quickly around. Nothing. The tunnel led off into the gloom in both directions.

I steadied the ladder while Alvarez climbed down. "Which way?" he muttered.

I took a few steps off to the right. I thought I detected a faint glow up ahead. "Down here."

It was chilly in the tunnel. The concrete floor was beaded with moisture. Although it was totally enclosed, there was a rich odor of earth. I heel-and-toed it cautiously along, aware of Alvarez' quickened breathing close behind me.

The tunnel broke to the right ahead and the light became stronger. I put back a hand to stop Alvarez as we reached the corner. Twenty feet away Ritenour crouched on the floor, back to us, before a conduit of telephone cables. A Coleman lantern threw a bright pool of light. The case he had carried stood open, revealing a small keyboard and CRT. Wires led from the portable terminal to an open joint in the conduit. Ritenour was working over the keyboard, typing out sets of characters which flashed on the screen, then vanished as he transmitted them.

"There's your slurp operation," I murmured. "That piggyback unit's tapped into the carrier lines between AeroTech's plant and the downtown headquarters. He can monitor transmissions from both ends

or he can originate his own inquiries into the data banks. All he needs is the current access code so he can identify himself as the opposite end to whichever one he's talking with."

"So right now he's racking up info on the latest aircraft component," Alvarez replied.

"Umm-hmmm. And as far as the operator on the other end knows, it's a legitimate inquiry. He's entered the access code and the data are going out over a secure system."

"Why does he need an inside man?"

"To feed him the new access codes and keep him up on the latest developments so he'll know when to monitor. He can't spend all his time down here picking off routine transmissions."

"Okay, let's nail him."

"Wait till he completes his inquiry and has all the data — it'll make beautiful evidence."

It took Larry Ritenour another twenty minutes. When he signed off and stood up to stretch, we moved in. His eyes got wild then sick when Alvarez flashed his shield. The detective read him his rights and placed him under arrest for computer fraud, theft, and accessory to murder. The kid began to stammer.

"M-m-murder? I didn't kill nobody. Y-y-you got the wrong guy."

"You set up Juanita Graham," I said coldly, "after she figured out you were running a slurp operation. We know your partner did the scut-work — who is he?"

"I w-want a lawyer."

"You got it," Alvarez said. "You can make your call downtown." He put the cuffs on Ritenour while I snapped a few pictures and gathered up the evidence.

"YOU KNEW JUANITA GRAHAM HAD TO GO WHEN RITENOUR called and warned you about the slip-up," I said, a few days later at the plant. "He told me he left her at eleven. What really happened was: he took her home around ten, then met you. The two of you went back to her place. She opened the door for Ritenour because she didn't think he was dangerous. You knocked her out — the examination showed the skull fracture was caused by a narrow blunt instrument, not a car bumper — and he went home to set up his alibi. You drove her car out to Memorial Park, disabled it, caught a ride back, took her out to the Parkway around midnight and ran her over. End of problem."

"You can't prove diddly," he said.

Hobie Bayne shook his head. "No goddam wonder we weren't making any progress on breaking this thing. The inside man was my own security chief."

Leo Wyman sneered. "So you brought in wonder boy here to solve it. All he did was get a girl killed. I deny any knowledge of this whole affair. Young Ritenour was tapping a common source force for his information. The inside man could be anybody. As for the hit-and-run, no way. All you've got is his word that I'm involved."

"Wrong," I said. "We've got something better than that. An eyewitness."

JUANITA LISTENED QUIETLY AS I TOLD HER ALL OF IT THAT afternoon. She was semi-propped up now, and a lot of the tubes and machines were gone. She would be in bed for weeks but the prognosis was good for a complete recovery. Pale and weak, she held onto my hand as I talked.

"They were the original odd couple. Larry was upset over being let go and knew computers inside out. Leo Wyman had run up some tremendous gambling debts. As chief of security he was privy to everything that went on in the plant. So they pooled their resources and began ripping off the completed projects. They sold the specifications through a middle-man — there's a big black market in research stuff — and stashed the money in numbered accounts. This would probably have been their last slurp. They were getting ready to cut and run."

"Blah, blah, blah, Mr. Detective," she said sweetly. "You only figured it out because Larry Ritenour had three Manhattans that night and started bragging to me about what he could do with a computer."

"True enough." I grinned. "If you hadn't written it down I'd still be out scrounging around for clues. I told Hobie Bayne that. There'll be a generous token of his appreciation waiting for you when you get back to work. Anyway, the hardest part was convincing Lieutenant Alvarez and the hospital to put out the phony death bulletin. I had to make sure those two didn't back off from the last job. We made you officially dead for awhile so they'd feel safe."

She smiled faintly. "You didn't have to try so hard to make it authentic. I think you owe me something more for taking your lumps. How about season tickets to the Astros?"

"It's a deal," I said. "Box seats."

*It was like World War II again, with a kamikaze driver
this time, hell bent on destruction!*

The Divine Wind

by JOSEPH McLAUGHLIN

THE DISPATCHER STUCK HIS HEAD IN AT THE OPEN DOOR marked *Commander*.

"Sir?"

"Yuh?" Cal Henderson didn't even look up from his paperwork. By now Graber knew he could listen and write at the same time.

"A weird call over CB channel 19 . . ."

"What the hell are we monitoring 19 for?" asked Henderson. "The emergency channel is 9. Let the guys on patrol listen to 19."

"That's just it, sir. Maurer relayed the message from some truckers coming up the coast. Seems some nut who calls himself 'Kamikaze' is running with a load of dynamite. Claims the charge is wired to detonate at impact."

Henderson squared the stack of documents he'd been signing by cracking them on the desktop. Then he leaned back in his old chair. It creaked comfortably with his weight and he felt the warm sun streaming through the window onto his back. Graber's lean young face was still hanging in the doorway.

"Can you triangulate?"

"Not unless he broadcasts continually. Give us some time and maybe we can establish his position by plotting a series of calls."

Henderson nodded and Graber exited with that flourish of head intended to throw a loose shock of brown hair back from his forehead.

Cal turned on his swivel-chair and propped one of his polished black boots on the low windowsill. It looked so incredibly peaceful outside with the sun bright on the green lawn, the state flag fluttering gaily at the top of its silver pole. A few miles off in that direction was the ocean.

Beside the ocean was a divided superhighway. And running on the highway was some screaming CB nut looking to blow up somebody or something. He didn't need this piece of aggravation on a Saturday morning, Cal decided as he turned back to his work.

A HALF-HOUR LATER GRABER WAS BACK. HE HAD WITH HIM a strip of map splotted with a series of colored circles.

"Each circle represents a transmission as close as we can pinpoint 'em. We know, for example, that a standard CB signal extends for five to seven miles under normal conditions. Whenever a trucker picks up a transmission he relays his position to us. Some ham operators are helping out, too. The way this chain is falling together it looks as if Kamikaze's on the Interstate between the 75 and 90 mile markers and rolling north."

"Anybody eyeball him yet?"

"No," Graber replied solemnly. "I'd like to send up the plane."

"Um." Cal considered it. Sending up the plane on Saturday meant paying overtime. Maybe getting a different pilot if Roger the Dodger wasn't available. And how much fuel would they burn up chasing this screwball? It angered him to have to respond to threats. He believed that it only encouraged more of the same and 99% of them were meaningless.

But, as always, there were innocent people to protect and a decision had to be made. Cal counted the circles on Graber's map. Seven confirmed transmissions, all about the same distance apart.

"Alright. See if Roger's available to go chasing his tail for a while."

Graber was out of the office like a shot. It amused Cal to watch him. Always ready for a radio caper of some kind. Maybe, Cal hoped, this would be just another piece of harmless fun. You had to treat it seriously on the surface, however, and he wondered what the terrorist's target could conceivably be: things or people. For example, the Naval Air Station fifty miles on up the coast. Or the nuclear power plant under construction at the mouth of Grand River. Or was he after personal revenge, an ex-wife maybe, who was breaking him with alimony and support payments?

"Graber," Cal called. The long, eager face appeared at the door jamb again.

"Sir?"

"Keep me posted as you go along."

"Yessir."

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, RALPH CRANSTON WAS WATCHING the light plane making its graceful turns 1,500 feet above the Ukiah interchange. His cruiser was parked on the median strip at one of the emergency vehicle turnarounds. But he was prepared to go north as soon as "Kamikaze" was identified. Cranston hadn't personally heard a transmission yet.

"He screams over the radio," Roger was saying. They were talking on one of the powerful VHF-FM bands.

"Sounds something like BAN-SIGH-EE."

"His handle is Kamikaze," said Cranston.

"Suicide flyer? Over."

"Roger, Dodger. Hopped-up Japanese kids were stuck into bamboo and silk crates and launched into the rising sun to die for the Emperor. Strictly a one-way ticket."

Roger was quiet for a moment, apparently busy with flying the plane. Cranston reflected that they didn't even know if this screamer was Japanese or not. A lot of people knew the culture. Personally, he was going to watch for a 100% American screwball. But the incident made him recall those Pacific days. He still carried a scar on the right buttock of his big, aging frame. Shrapnel from a Jap destroyer's artillery.

In the confused light that shimmered on the cruiser's warm hood, he began to see it all again. A buzzing engine. The explosion muffled by the water. His own arms reaching out to pull the dazed, yellow boy from the water.

"What does it mean?" Roger came back.

"Kamikaze?"

"Roger."

"One of them dove at our ship during the war. Missed, but scared the hell out of everyone." Cranston remembered then. "The word itself means, believe it or not . . . Divine Wind."

"Roger. We copy you. Divine Wind."

Yes, a very long time ago, Cranston thought. A month after they'd picked him up the Japanese boy was cowering on the ground with Cranston's own fist holding a .38 caliber sidearm against the back of his head. The whole crew had been edgy from long weeks on patrol. A shipment of beer had come in. Then that picture appeared in a magazine in someone's mail. That picture of a sailor, captured by the Japanese, kneeling blindfolded while a sword was poised to strike down on his neck. The chief petty officer had knocked Cranston's arm

aside just as the pistol went off.

The Cessna snarled overhead and Roger's voice crackled over the radio.

"We've got an eyeball on him."

"Kamikaze?"

"Roger. Driving a red Datsun sedan. There's a small box or canister strapped to the front bumper. Moving north within the speed limit about the one-one-five mile marker. Over."

Cranston snapped on the CB and dialed 19. There was always chatter on the channel. The truckers used it to exchange information on movements of the patrol. Cranston hoped that Kamikaze wouldn't pick up his whereabouts until he could get behind him. There wasn't that much traffic rolling past on this Saturday afternoon and that should be a help in any pursuit.

The next sound made Cranston sit bolt upright in his seat. The voice was sexy, silky, with just that note of pleading urgency that had haunted sailors and flyers all over the Pacific. It was 1943 all over again.

"Kamikaze. Kamikaze. This is Tokyo Rose behind you. Please pull over. Please stop the car."

The transmission was so clear that Cranston knew she must be near. Kamikaze answered just as he rolled by Cranston's position. Cranston caught a look at the graying, Japanese head. A black mike was held against lips drawn back in a menacing scream.

"AIIIIIEEE!"

The cry rattled the little CB speaker as Cranston spun the cruiser's wheels out onto the highway. The Datsun was moving fast now, well over the speed limit. Kamikaze had seen the patrol car and probably the plane overhead as well. If he really intended to blow something up, this would be his move. The big Ford shot down the roadway like a lazy hawk diving after an insignificant bug.

"SIR." GRABER CAUGHT CAL HENDERSON AS HE WAS RETURNING from lunch.

"Yuh." Cal was just hanging up his jacket.

"Roger's got us patched into the chase."

"Chase?"

"We've got Kamikaze on the run."

"Graber!" Cal exploded. "What idiot is chasing a man whose car is loaded with dynamite?"

"Uh, it's Cranston, sir."

Cranston. The big lug knows better than that, thought Cal. He ran a hand wearily through his gray-brown shock of hair.

"Call him off right now before the maniac runs into some family in a camper or a tanker loaded with gasoline." Cal followed the dispatcher out to his bank of radios to listen.

Art Murray, the dispatcher who was coming on duty at two o'clock, was already listening with interest. He looked up and smiled as Cal and Graber approached.

"Roger says they've taken exit ramp 11. Now proceeding along old State Route 43." Murray reached up and adjusted a couple of dials with nicotine-stained finger and thumb.

"The cruiser's almost on top of the Datsun," he said.

Cal picked up the microphone.

"Commander Henderson to Car 38. Over."

There was no response but the continuing crackle of static and the squeal of distant transmissions breaking apart before they could be fully articulated by the speakers. Cal called twice more before he finally lost patience.

"Cranston," he shouted into the mike. "You back off from that chase. This is an order."

Nothing. Cal looked at the radiomen.

"He's obviously turned off the VHF in his cruiser," said Graber. "We still hear them through the airplane tie-in but now it's all coming from CB channels. Roger picks them up and relays the conversations to us on the high frequency FM."

"Can't Roger relay our message in turn?" asked Cal.

"There's no CB transmitter in the plane. Only a receiver."

Murray scrounged another cigarette out of his shirt pocket and prepared to light it.

"We won't be talking with Cranston any more," he said.

Just then the female voice came over the air again.

"Father," she wailed. "Stop. Please stop."

"Who's that?" Cal asked.

"Girl who's been broadcasting," Graber answered. "She must be following them. The Jap — if he is Japanese — must be her father."

A circuit opened and they heard the low drone of an engine.

"Roger here. A third car is following down SR 43. Looks like they're all headed for the ocean. Over."

While Cal and his staff waited helplessly, a hundred squawks and

squeals burst over the radio. Then something clear would come in.

"That there smoke-em-up bear just took off on the exit ramp at the one-two-four chasin' a four-wheeler . . ." Again, the transmission would break up in a series of hoots and whistles.

"CB radio. An imperfect and short-range medium," commented Graber.

"And damned noisy, too," growled Cal as he headed back to the office to don his uniform jacket and broad-rimmed hat.

CRANSTON BROKE THE CHANNEL INFORMALLY, WITHOUT any preface, as if he were on a private wire to the hurtling red sedan in front of him.

"C'mon, Kamikaze. Stop the car. You don't have to prove anything to anybody. We were all in the same war."

Cranston was surprised to hear anything but a scream or a sputter of Japanese curses.

"What war you in, Yankee?" The question came over the radio in a shrill burst. Cranston noted that the old man was having difficulty controlling his car. He might be high on something. And at these speeds, a two-lane highway looked as wide as a snake's back. Cranston decided to back off the chase a little so as not to precipitate a crash.

"World War Two, mister. The big one. With *real* Kamikazes." Cranston was piloting the car with his left hand while he keyed the mike with his big, right paw. Just then the two cars encountered a sharp dip and turn in the road. Cranston dropped the mike for a moment and grabbed the steering wheel with both hands. Then he was back in control again, but furious with the Datsun slithering wildly ahead of him.

"Stop that car, mister!" Cranston was shouting into the mike now. "Or you're a dead man." He was talking outside regulations now and was secretly glad he'd turned off the VHF. Someone back at headquarters was probably shouting at him for sure.

Cranston was surprised at himself. He normally wasn't a violent man. He had a gracefully middle-aged wife who loved him and a daughter who was a senior at San Jose State. But he was feeling something vital moving in his guts. Something he hadn't felt in all the years of chasing speeders and towing away wrecks while serving the highway patrol. It was the war again, all right. All the hot, shark-infested, malaria-laden, steaming hell of it. Another tinny squawk came over the air.

"You in the Navy, Yankee?"

"Pacific!" Cranston shouted into the Jap's ear. "The goddam, forsaken Pacific Theater."

He touched the brakes as the Datsun's taillights came on. Then, almost ramming the Jap, he followed him through a sharp turn onto a one-lane beach road. It was unpaved and Cranston had difficulty seeing through the rolling cone of dust that was spiraling up ahead of him. The road was full of ruts, too, and Cranston was being bounced around pretty badly in the cruiser. He backed off from the pursuit by a few more yards, certain they would run out of real estate soon.

Kamikaze came on the channel again as they both hit a stretch of loose gravel. He was screaming a lot of short phrases in his native tongue. Cranston took them as curses.

"Listen, you yellow bastard," he shot back, "You're all cowards! One of your Kamikazes dove at our ship and couldn't even hit it. I pulled him from the water . . ."

Just then the Datsun topped the last hill and disappeared off the horizon. It would be all downhill to the beach now. Cranston had him. As the road dropped away in front of him, Cranston suddenly saw the front of the Datsun facing him through a cloud of dust and gravel. Bits of rock tapped on the cruiser's windshield like an unexpected, leisurely rainfall.

The gray canister that was strapped on the front bumper of the Datsun was facing him squarely now. There were big rock faces on either side where the road had been cut through to the sea. There was no way out.

Cranston perceived all this in a single second. All he heard before the explosion was the surprised roar of the cruiser's engine as he floored the accelerator and both he and the Japanese screamed together over the radio.

THE BLACK SMOKE THAT PLUMED THE AIR COULD BE SEEN for miles. It hung so low and acrid over the scene of the crash and explosion that Henderson had organized his control point back at the entrance to the beach road on 43. A couple of ambulances rolled softly past with their ruby lights flashing.

"They'll have to pick up what pieces they can find and put 'em in rubber bags," Maurer observed in his Ohio drawl. He kept his voice down and talked out of the side of his mouth so the girl wouldn't hear.

Henderson looked over at the Japanese-American girl who was

collapsed and sobbing in the back seat of his own car, No. 1. Taking her down the road to that notch in the rocks had been one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do. Her father had done a 180 degree spin on the gravel and taken Cranston head on. But why?

"I've got to get more of the story out of her," Cal said, nodding toward the girl. Maurer gave his broad-brimmed hat a quick and sympathetic jerk and headed up to 43 to move on the string of sight-seers who were blocking traffic there. Cal walked over to the girl.

"Think you can talk yet?" he asked.

She nodded her head yes, but Cal wasn't convinced. He gave her a few minutes more while he made a couple of routine notes and called Murray. It turned out that Graber was still on duty.

"Get Roger down now," Cal barked. "And you go home."

"Yessir. Roger got a couple of swell aerial shots. Over."

Cal winced for the girl's sake.

"Over and out," he said, jamming the mike onto its hook. Then he turned to the girl and she did seem a little more composed. She had taken the handkerchief away from her face and, although her eyes were still closed, Cal could see that familiar expression of resignation and acceptance that always came sooner or later.

"Miss Yoshimoko?" he asked softly. The girl opened her reddened eyes and looked at Cal and he knew that she would be able to talk.

"Helen Yoshimoko," she said. My mother was a native American."

Well, Cal thought. That explained the fairer skin. And there was even something Caucasian about the eyes although the hair that framed her face was vividly black. Cal noticed that some of the long strands were damp and stringy from her tears.

"This was your father, then?"

"Yes."

"What got into him?"

She shook her head in bewilderment, but Cal could tell that she knew what had happened, if not why.

"He was Kamikaze during the war," she said. "His duty was to die for the Emperor. But something happened and he hit the water instead of a ship. When the Americans pulled him out alive he was disgraced forever."

She sat up a little straighter and composed her face and adjusted her clothing.

"I never knew any of this," she said, "Until our Emperor Hirohito

visited the U.S. a couple of years ago. Father saw him from a distance and almost went mad with grief. He tried to push through a crowd in Washington and throw himself at Hirohito's feet. The police put him in jail then. He hasn't been the same since."

"This is what gave him the idea or need to recreate the Kamikaze scene?" Cal asked.

"He couldn't talk of anything but Nippon since then," she said. "He lived in America after the end of the war and was happy for a long time." Then she looked up squarely at Henderson, not blinking her almond eyes.

"Tradition and discipline were drilled into him from childhood, commander. He had to redeem himself, finally. I'm just sorry that one of your men was killed over this."

Cal nodded silently and thought for a minute.

"What was the name of the ship that picked up your father?"

She didn't know. She was sorry. Besides, what did it matter? Cal helped her toward her car and watched her start it and drive away. The slim CB antenna waved stiffly as the sleek sports car bounced up the beach road and turned onto 43. Maurer came up just then.

"The firemen claim they've got things in shape for the moment," he said. "The wind's coming up a little and with any luck will blow this darned smoke away."

"The Divine Wind," Cal said thoughtfully.

"What?" Maurer looked puzzled.

"Maurer, did Cranston ever tell you about any of his war experiences?"

Maurer looked at Cal with his head cocked to one side.

"He was in the Navy as I recall. Why?"

Cal was silent for a moment as a couple of deputy sheriffs guided the first ambulance backward up the beach road until it reached an open area where it could turn around. Then it rolled slowly past them. No light blinking now, no need to hurry.

"He ever tell you about the Japanese prisoner he attempted to shoot?"

"No. Don't believe so," Maurer said, scratching his jaw.

That feeling of late Saturday afternoon began to close around them. Out on the ocean the sun hung like a red ball about to touch the water. Cal thought about the widow he would have to face later that evening.

"It's a sorry thing to say," Cal went on, "Especially for the girl's sake. But right now I wish he hadn't missed."

When they downgraded my father, they left me with two alternatives: I could agree with them and thereby acknowledge my own worthlessness, or I could make a hero of him. I made him my hero and vowed to set a dozen criminal records in his memory.

The Baker's Dozen

by DORIS HILLER

The old man loosened his seat belt a bit and took off his necktie. "I appreciate your taking me to Edgartown. It saves me a long bus ride. And, since the statutes of limitations have all expired long ago, I don't mind helping you write a book. Where would you like to start?"

"At the beginning," I said. "When did you first decide to be a criminal?"

I took my eyes off the road for a second to glance at him. He shrugged once and made a wry face. "When I was in the orphanage, I suppose," he said. "Yes, that's when I made up my mind. I never knew my mother. She died when I was a baby. Then my father fell from a museum roof and was killed, and I was sent to an orphanage. I was nine at the time."

"What was your father doing on the roof?"

"Trying to escape. He'd just stolen a ruby the size of a hen's egg from a display case. They found it on his body."

"They told you *that* when you were nine?" I couldn't hide my outrage.

He nodded. "It was supposed to make me want to travel the Roads

of Righteousness.”

“But it didn’t.”

“No. If anything, it had the opposite effect. My dad was the only person I could use to gauge my personal worth. When they downgraded my father, they left me with two alternatives: I could agree with them and thereby acknowledge my own worthlessness, or I could make a hero of him. I made him my hero and vowed to set a dozen criminal records in his memory.”

He must have done a lot of reading and soul-searching while he was in prison. He spoke well and made a weird kind of sense.

“What was your first record?” I asked to keep the conversation on a track that would make money for me.

“I set the record for cattle rustling when I was out west just before World War I. I hired some men to help me, rented a fleet of trucks, and cleaned out a couple of ranches. In those days the roads and vehicles weren’t what they are today, but in three months we transported over thirty thousand steers to the stock yards in Chicago.”

“And after that?”

“I was involved in one of the early land booms in Florida. People are always telling stories about conmen selling lots out in the Gulf of Mexico, but I’m the only man who actually did it.”

“And next?”

“Horse racing. I’m the only man who ever fixed all eight races at a major track for five consecutive days.”

EMERSON “RED” MASON DIDN’T LOOK ANYTHING LIKE I’D pictured him. In fact, he didn’t appear to be much older than the day he had begun his last prison sentence twenty years earlier.

Maybe that was to be expected. If the yellowed and faded newspapers I’d seen were to be believed, even at that time he’d appeared exceptionally youthful. Now he came striding toward me from the prison’s main gate, swinging a huge suitcase in one hand and carrying the letter I’d written to him in the other. He displayed a vitality I’ll be happy to have if I ever reach seventy-three.

“You the lady who wrote to me?” he asked, stopping in front of me and setting down the heavy case.

His eyebrows and the thick hair that covered his skull were both white, and he had laugh-lines at the corners of his mouth and eyes that deepened when he smiled at me. His skin was pink and dotted with freckles. One look was all it took to know his white hair had once been

bright red. Up close, he looked like a youthful fifty-year-old.

"Yes, I'm the one who wrote," I answered, shaking his hand and receiving a firm grip from him. "My car's over there."

He followed me the few steps to my car. We put his suitcase into the trunk and I got behind the wheel. As soon as I had explained to him how the seatbelt worked, we were on our way.

I lit a cigarette, then offered the pack to him. He smiled and waved it away. "I don't have any bad habits," he said. Then, after a pause, he added, "Anymore."

I laughed. "But you used to have them all. According to my research, you hold twelve criminal records that've never been broken."

"Is that why you want to write a book about me?"

"Uh-huh. It'll be a good book and you'll get twenty-five percent of whatever it earns."

I didn't tell him the book wasn't going to earn much. No large trade publisher would be interested in the life story of an old has-been written by a young never-was, but I did think I could sell it to one of the paperback publishers for a modest amount. All I had to do was keep him talking long enough to harvest the highlights of his past. If it didn't take more than two or three weeks, I figured to collect a fair-sized wage for my time and trouble.

"What about your wives?" I slowed the car so I could watch his face.

"What about them?"

"There's been speculation that you hate women," I said.

He shook his head. "I had twelve wives because I *like* women. Every time I went to prison, I lost the wife I had and had to find another when I got out. But that's not a record, not even for this country."

I knew about all of his records, of course. Some of them, like the kidnapping and the jewel robbery, are still talked about with awe in police circles even after twenty or thirty years. My favorite was the Great Lakes piracy, but I got him to say a few words about all of them before we stopped for lunch.

WHILE WE ATE, THE CONVERSATION SHIFTED FROM PAST TO future. Red Mason told me he was going to Edgartown because he'd bought a small business there. He'd had a few dollars his last lawyer had somehow overlooked, and he'd added the money he'd saved after twenty years of working in the prison factory.

"What kind of business is it?" I asked.

"A bakery," he answered with a note of pride in his voice. "I used

to be a pretty fair pastry cook when I was in the service. I thought I'd see if I still have what it takes."

There was a small apartment behind the bakery. He invited me to stay with him for a few weeks if I wanted to. After I saw that the room had a lock on the door, and reminded myself that he was seventy-three years old, I took him up on the offer. Besides saving me the cost of a motel room, it gave me an opportunity to be around him more.

While Red Mason was putting his new business in order, I kept after him with questions. The only time he could get away from me was when he slept or took one of his walks. He took long walks every morning and evening about the time the mail train passed through town, a habit he told me he'd picked up in prison where he used to circle the exercise yard. I worked on my manuscript while he was away.

I had expected Red Mason to be in good spirits — what recently released man wouldn't be? — but I was surprised at how good they were. His outlook was completely optimistic, and he didn't have a bad word for anybody or anything, including prison. Once, when he found a dime in the street, he picked it up and showed it to me as though it were a diamond. His face was split by his little-boy grin. "Been lucky all my life," he said.

He didn't seem to remember the bad times. He never mentioned the escape attempt when he was shot off the prison wall, or the time he was thrown from a second story window by a jealous husband. The fact that forty-five of his seventy-three years had been spent behind bars was never discussed. He talked about only the good times.

IN LESS THAN A WEEK, I HAD THE BOOK BLOCKED OUT. I decided to call it *Red Mason's Records* and I typed that on my title page. The book itself was to be made up of twelve chapters, each twenty manuscript pages long, for a total of sixty thousand words. That was a good length for a paperback. Each chapter would be devoted to one of Mason's records.

As I wrote, I became convinced that Red Mason's bravado was a defense mechanism. Humor had become for him what it is for many people — a shield to hide behind. The more he was hurt, the louder he laughed, and the more outrageous his jokes became. As he recounted the stories behind his twelve criminal records, I think he began to realize that the best years of his life hadn't been all that good.

But he emerged as a stubborn, strong-willed man, too. He had always kept his word, whether it was a threat or a promise. And the

book I was writing showed that his early vow to establish a dozen criminal records hadn't been made lightly. Mason was a man who never counted costs, only results.

I suppose that it was because of his past that Edgartown seemed such an unlikely place for him to choose to end his days. It was a sleepy little town with less than ten thousand inhabitants. Except for a dozen stores, a small movie theater, and a motel on the highway, there wasn't much to see. Even the mail train didn't bother to stop unless a passenger was getting off, or the station master signalled there was one to be picked up. Edgartown didn't fit the picture I had of Red Mason.

Then I was forced to revise my thinking. I finished chapter twelve today, the one about the armored car robbery in Massachusetts, and I was pleased with the way the project had turned out. I left the apartment and walked past the cooling ovens to the small shop where Red was waiting on a customer.

"The book's finished," I announced.

He was placing doughnuts into a bag for a young woman with a baby in her arms.

"Is it?" he asked with his mischievous grin. Then he continued to fill the bag, but his eyes didn't leave mine.

As he finished counting the pastry, I heard the whistle of the mail train, and I realized that Red Mason wasn't a has-been. Not yet. There would have to be one more chapter before the book was completed.

Mason held twelve records, but the one for train robbery wasn't among them.

And a baker's dozen is thirteen.

from THE CRIME FIGHTER'S CATALOG



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The officer and Alfred both stared down at Ed's body, sprawled, face down upon the floor: an ugly, bloody wound had split his head open and it was from this flow of blood that Ed had etched with his right hand the words "Sugar Cain" on the floor.

Revenge

by DON KERR

ALFRED WAS THE FIRST PERSON TO DISCOVER ED'S BODY.

"That's just how I found him," Alfred told the grim-faced policeman in a shaky voice. "I didn't touch a thing — except the phone to call you people."

The policeman nodded in approval. "You did everything right, sir," he said.

The policeman was a nice boy, Alfred thought. Short hair, clean cut, neat and polite. He had called Alfred "sir."

It wasn't often you got that kind of respect from youngsters, especially in this neighborhood.

"Put out an APB on Sugar Cain," the policeman said to his partner. "And call in homicide."

The partner left. The policeman turned to Alfred. "Did you know the deceased well?"

"Know him well?" Alfred repeated the question. "We were like brothers. We grew up here. We raised our families here. I was best

man at his wedding. And last year, I helped him bury his wife. We wanted to die here — but not like this. What's happened to people, officer? Why would they do something like this to an old man like Ed?"

The officer and Alfred both stared down at Ed's body, sprawled, face down upon the floor: an ugly, bloody wound had split his head open and it was from this flow of blood that Ed had etched with his right hand the words "Sugar Cain" on the floor.

The officer took down the data on Ed that Alfred gave him. His full name: Edward Droboniski. His age: 73. His relatives: A son, living in California and two daughters, one divorced, the other married with two children, living in the city on the west side.

His wife, Carrie, of 45 years, had died last year, from complications following a beating by the local street gang which was led by a brutal youth named Sugar Cain.

"What do you know about this Sugar Cain?" the officer asked Alfred.

"A punk," Alfred said, his voice hardening with hate. "He's taken over the neighborhood. He terrorizes us all. A leech. He knows when social security checks come out. He preys on the older people, the weak ones. He makes us all pay protection money to him so we can cash our checks. Even if we have it sent direct to the bank, we still have to pay him protection money. I guess Ed finally told him to go to hell."

"Why didn't someone complain to the police?" The officer asked, annoyed. "They can't get away with stuff like that. But we can't stop them if nobody will complain."

"Who's that brave?" Alfred asked, bitterly. "Who's going to complain? What good does it do? We complain, you put him in jail, the judge lets him out and then he comes back here and beats up the person who was foolish enough to complain."

The policeman frowned. But Alfred knew from his silence that he had no answer for that. It was a sad but painful truth.

"Well," the officer finally said, "why don't you people move out? You shouldn't be living in a place like this."

"Wait until you've lived in a place seventy years, officer," Alfred said. "Then maybe you'll understand why we don't move out."

"All our lives are wrapped up here, in these streets, in these houses. This is where we went to school. This is where we met our wives, got married, raised families. All our memories of the good life, the good times are here. This is our neighborhood. I've been going to the same church for sixty years. How can I change now? Go to a new place, a

strange place, with people I don't know? I've got maybe five more years left. What am I going to do? Go live with my son in Minnesota? Sure he wants me to. 'Come live with me, dad,' he says. 'It's too dangerous in the old neighborhood.' He's right. *I* know he's right. *You* know he's right. But what's an old man like me going to do with him? He's got his own family to raise. I'd just be in the way. I haven't got enough time left to start over."

The policeman sighed. "Well, anyway," he said, "your friend has spoken up for you. With this evidence we ought to be able to put this Sugar Cain character away for a long time and break up his gang — for awhile, anyway."

AND SO IT WAS. THE POLICE CAUGHT SUGAR CAIN AT HIS girl friend's house. He hadn't even gone into hiding, apparently confident that no one could tie him in with Ed's death — and, except for the bloody death message, nobody would have been able to.

He was coolly defiant upon his arrest; then enraged when he was told of the murder charge, loudly protesting his innocence.

At his trial the prosecution dwelled on his record of terrorizing elderly people, producing Alfred and several others whose rage over the brutal beating of Ed overcame their fear of testifying concerning Cain's tyranny.

The photograph of Ed's battered body and the bloody accusation "Sugar Cain" was shown to the jury with telling effect.

Sugar Cain's girl friend testified unconvincingly in his behalf that the night of the murder he had been with her.

Sugar Cain himself took the stand to hotly deny the charges. "I wouldn't kill an old guy like that," he shouted. "What kind of an animal do you take me for? I got parents. I got a lot of respect for old people."

The jury was unmoved. They found him guilty and he received a long sentence.

After all, who would believe a punk like that?

Only someone like Alfred, who knew the truth.

Alfred had found Ed dead all right. Dead of a heart attack. It had taken a lot out of him to batter in Ed's head like that and then write Sugar Cain's name from the blood that flowed from the wound.

But he figured that Ed would have approved. After all, why should Ed die for nothing when he could get revenge for the murder of his wife, Carrie? ●

Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS
by JOHN BALL

Every genuine mystery collector will want to look into the offerings of the Academy Press of Chicago. For example, it isn't too late to get a first American edition of *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* by Baroness Orczy (\$5.00 in paper), some very desirable Margaret Millar reprints, and the first book publication of Charles Dickens' *London Crimes* (\$8.95 in quality paperback). In addition, Academy is reprinting the works of Leo Bruce, the creator of Sergeant Beef and of history teacher Carolus Deane. Both series have won considerable praise in England. (The author was the noted biographer Rupert Croft-Cooke.) After tracking down the copyright owner to India, Academy secured the publication rights to the Deane books. The first to see light here is *Jack on the Gallows Tree*, which probably would have delighted Agatha Christie (\$14.95). In the Sergeant Beef series, try *Case Without a Corpse*, in paperback at \$4.50. You can write for a catalog to Academy at 425 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611

Academy can also supply a well-produced book containing all of the comic strip adventures of *Secret Agent X-9* written by Dashiell Hammett plus a bonus one by Leslie Charteris. The publisher is International Polygonics — \$9.95 in a quality paperback format.

☆ ☆ ☆

Peter Fox, who attracted attention with his espionage story, *Mantis*, is back with *The Trail of the Reaper*. This time we have a poisoner who is knocking off English celebrities, some of whom would hardly be missed. There is a hair-raising chase through a London underground passageway near the end that is guaranteed to hold attention. A lot of good action and deft writing here, slightly diluted by the fact that the experienced reader will anticipate the ending. Otherwise a fine job. (St. Martin's, \$11.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Arthur Maling, whose Brock Potter is always dependable, has done it again in *A Taste of Treason*. This time financial analyst Potter encounters industrial espionage on the part of a foreign power. He is unwilling to get involved, but does and shuttles back and forth across the country untangling a very dangerous situation indeed. The story moves along cleanly and shows the author back at the top of his form. (Harper and Row, \$14.50)

☆ ☆ ☆

Edgar winning critic Jon Breen steps onto Dick Francis' patch with his new book *Listen for the Click* that is all about horse racing. It is hard to determine if Mr. Breen is writing a serious mystery or a gentle parody (at which he is expert). His detective is an overweight race track announcer who has trouble squeezing into his tiny booth to call the results. An unpopular but winning jockey is found lying dead beside a statue of a famous horse he was banned from riding. There is a round up of the many suspects at the finish; the only one missing is Nero Wolfe to tell us who did it. But his stand in is there to do the job. (Walker, \$12.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

If the pulps intrigue you, then you'll want a copy of *The Defective Detective in the Pulps* by Gary Hoppenstand and Ray B. Browne. There is a short, but lucid introduction followed by clear reproductions

of six pulp stories all featuring detectives who are in some way handicapped or abnormal. One of them, a private eye, has no face and wears a piece of celluloid large enough to cover the place where it should be. The introduction is titled *I'd kiss you, sweetheart, but my lips are missing*. Which gives you the idea. (The Popular Culture Press, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403 \$15.95 in cloth, \$7.95 in paper.)

☆ ☆ ☆

Father Brown, Chesterton's immortal little detective, is back with us once more, this time in *The Father Brown Omnibus*. Essentially five books in one, this volume contains all fifty one Father Brown stories, including the often overlooked *The Vampire of the Village*. The good father is a cornerstone of the literature; here is a way to have him close to hand in one volume. Clear type of adequate size is a welcome asset. (Dodd Mead, \$14.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

A refreshing change from formula plotting is found in *A Gathering of Ghosts* by Roy Lewis. The detective is Arnold Landon, a lesser city planning official who has an expert's knowledge of wood and carpentry. In line of duty he discovers that an ancient barn about to be torn down to make way for an amusement park is actually the work of a legendary craftsman and is an historical treasure. In the course of butting heads with the would be developers, who do not appreciate his efforts, he solves two murders in a most unorthodox way. A very good entertainment. (St. Martin's, \$10.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Erle Stanley Gardner, who gave us both Perry Mason and the team of Donald Lam and Bertha Cool, also wrote westerns. A group of his Whispering Sands stories of gold fever on the western desert have been gathered in a volume called *Pay Dirt* by Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg. Gardner collectors, and there are many of them, will enjoy meeting their literary hero in a new environment. (Morrow, \$15.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Designs of Darkness is not a book of the occult despite a cover that certainly suggests something diabolical; it's a collection of informative interviews with noted mystery writers conducted by Diana Cooper-

Clark. A few of the interviewees are Ross Macdonald, P.D. James, Ruth Rendell, Patricia Highsmith, Julian Symons, and Dick Francis. Oddly, the author's by-line appears at the beginning of each chapter. This is hardly necessary as her portrait on the back cover is quite sufficient to keep her in mind. (Popular Culture Press, Bowling Green, Ohio, 43403)



If you like private eye stories on the wild side, then you will probably be delighted with *The Siskiyou Two-Step* by Richard Hoyt. First our hero finds the body of a nude girl in a river, then in a rescue attempt he rides her like a surfboard through the rapids. That's for openers. There is espionage and a wide galaxy of improbable but engaging characters before it's all untangled. Warning: don't try the same two-step yourself; it's highly dangerous (Morrow, \$10.95)

PAPERBACK NOTES: Avon leads off this month with three originals, all set more or less in Mexico. A villain worthy of James Bond is William C. Matthews' *King Cobra*, a Mexican mob chieftain who indulges in torture and poisonous snakes. But U.S. Government agent David Caine is on the job. \$2.75 . . . More high adventure, also in Mexico, is found in *The Cortes Letter* by Michael Gillette. Some artifacts that hold the key to a great treasure complicate the life of Arizona professor Eric Pendleton. \$2.75 . . . Completing the Mexican-based trio from the same publisher is *Murder on Location* by George Kennedy, the distinguished actor who pulls off a tour de force. He is the protagonist of his own book, uses his own name, and guess what — he will star in the movie version playing himself. There aren't many who could pull all that off, but actor Kennedy, assuming that he wrote this book himself, is also a pro at the typewriter. \$2.95 . . . Stephen Dobyns' *Saratoga Swimmer*, which is about racing at the famous spa, is now in paperback from Penguin at \$2.95 . . . Walker continues its fine series of British mysteries with Peter Alding's *Murder is Suspected*. It's yours for \$2.95 . . . And now for this month's shudder special. We nominate *Houses of Horror* by Richard Winer. This is a non-fiction account of honest-to-devil haunted houses in America. There are horrible deeds carefully researched literally from Maine to California. There are murders, living burials, and lots more to fill the empty night hours. Pleasant dreams. From Bantam at \$2.95. ●

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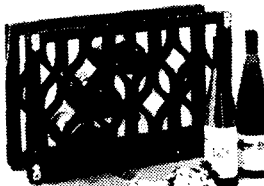
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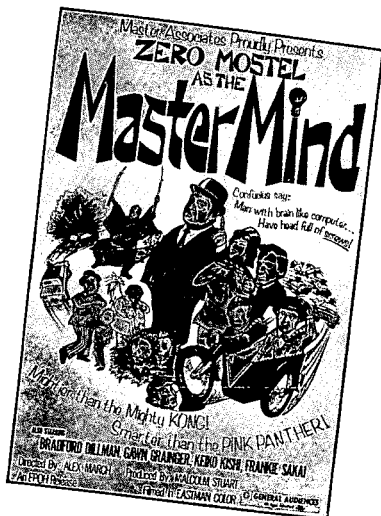
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